The Sex Lives of Saints

An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography

Virginia Burrus

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DIVINATIONS: REREADING LATE ANCIENT RELIGION

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An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography

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Introduction: Hagiography and the History of Sexuality

Erotic experience is possibly close to sanctity.
—*Georges Bataille,* Erotism: Death and Sensuality

The Sex Lives of Saints? What could such words possibly signify? Surely everyone knows that the repression of erotic desire is the hallmark of Christian sanctity: a "sex life" is precisely what a proper saint lacks. At most, ascetic eros—encoded as yearning for God—may be seen as the residue of an imperfectly sublimated sexuality. Better yet: it is a merely metaphorical expression for a purely desexualized love. Worse still: it reflects pleasure derived from practices of self-denial rooted in a pathological hatred of the body.

It is difficult simply to contradict such widespread and thus all too easily anticipated doubts. Nonetheless, I find myself moved to pursue a different path of interpretation. The wager is at once intellectual and spiritual: might it be possible to take *common knowledge* by surprise, to disarm its resigned certainties, to disturb it with the stirrings of a most *uncommon* love, and thereby to enable a *different knowing* of both "sex" and "sanctity"? My title, though lightly ironic, is not intended to be oxymoronic: ancient Lives of Saints, I suggest, are the site of an exuberant eroticism. Resistance to the pervasive *anti-erotic* interpretation of hagiography (and of asceticism more generally) is crucial to the excitement—or, more conventionally phrased, the "significance"—of this argument. That sanctity can be restyled as an erotic art, that the holy Life carries us to the extremities of human desire, that (conversely) "erotic experience is possibly close to sanctity"—these are admittedly queer notions, seductive insinuations, even downright perverse proposals, in relation to traditional readings of the Lives, whether popular or scholarly, literary-historical or doctrinal. I take the risk of transgressing more than a few cherished orthodoxies in the hope of thereby uncovering a theory and practice of eroticism that is responsively attuned to the hallowed texts of the Christian past while also remaining unapologetically attentive to an urgent need of the present moment—namely, to affirm the holiness of a love that is simultaneously embodied and transcendent, sensual and spiritual, painful and joyous; that may encompass but can by no

means be limited to (indeed, may at points entail disciplined refusal of) the demands of either biological reproduction or institutionalized marriage; that furthermore resists the reductions of the modern cult of the orgasm. In the stories of saints who steadfastly reject both the comforts and the confinements of conventional roles and relationships (swapping and discarding "identities" like so many threadbare cloaks), we may discover not only evidence of the historic transformation of desire but also testimony to the transformative power of eros.

If the interests that impel this work are thus revealed to be broadly theoretical and theological, at once undeniably political and inescapably personal, the approach is first and foremost historical, betraying my own disciplinary orientation. The suggestion that hagiography conveys a sublime art of eroticism rather than a repressive morality of sexuality implicitly raises questions and disrupts assumptions about the position of Christianity in the "history of sexuality"—the by-now conventional label for a wide-reaching scholarly conversation flourishing in the wake of the publication of the first three volumes of Michel Foucault's ambitious (and unfinished) *History of Sexuality*.[1] Although the subsequent chapters will not cleave closely to an explicitly Foucaultian analysis, here at the outset I want to map the larger historical trajectory of my argument by offering a fresh reading of Foucault's own emplotment of Christianity in the history of desire. If Foucault's thought provides a promising point of departure, it will also draw me into a broader web of contemporary discourses of eroticism, within which I will subsequently situate readings of the hagiographical texts of late antiquity.

* * *

"The so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity. Shall we say then that Christianity did not change the state of things?"[2] This is the question (following upon an assertion) that Foucault poses for himself in his oft-revised and teasingly unfinished attempt to insert Christianity into the history of sexuality.[3] It is also the question on which this present work turns. In respect to sexuality, how *did* Christianity *change the state of things*? What revisions and interruptions in ancient Mediterranean conceptions of erotic pleasure and sexual ethics were introduced with the rise of the church?

The "so-called Christian morality" to which Foucault refers crystallizes in a sacralized monogamy in which sexuality is a means legitimated by its reproductive end, while pleasure (a necessary evil at best) is shadowed by

suspicion. Like Foucault in the cited passage, I am here less interested in the consolidation and transmission of such an incipiently heterosexist ethics—in which the christianization of Roman culture did, admittedly, play an enormously significant role—than in the simultaneous eruption of a powerful crosscurrent of asceticized eroticism.[4] This "countererotics," redolent with "counterpleasures,"[5] is arguably not only more innovative, historically speaking, but also more central to Christian thought and practice in the period of antiquity and well beyond. Indeed, in the wake of two decades of intensive scholarly focus on ancient Christian asceticism, the "so-called Christian" marital morality, characteristically prohibitive, begins to take on the appearance of a reluctant concession, an ambivalent by-product of a movement that, for all its immense diversity, was consistently and subversively antifamilial from its very beginnings.[6] As historian of Christianity Mark Jordan puts it, "We must recognize . . . that Christian marriage was justified against claims of virginity (rather than apart from them). It is not clear how far Christian marriage is an alternative ideal and how far it is a derivative ideal"—derivative, that is, not only in respect to Roman ethics but also in respect to Christian asceticism, due to its structurally dependent and secondary status.[7] Departing from Foucault's script—*perhaps*—I would go so far as to propose that there arises within Christianity a distinctive *ars erotica* that does not so much predate as effectively resist and evade the *scientia sexualis* that likewise emerges (derivatively) in late antiquity and eventually culminates in the production of a modern, western regime of "sexuality."[8] If it is scarcely an accident, it remains nonetheless also a paradox, that the authority of Christian tradition has come to be unquestioningly aligned with the interests of heterosexism and "family values."[9] One of the aims of this book is to make that paradox once again palpable, to explore its tensions, and thereby to begin to free a transformative theology of eros from the stifling grip of a repressive morality of sexuality.

I say that I am *perhaps* departing from Foucault's script, because Foucault himself is, I think, intriguingly ambivalent. For Foucault, ancient Christian asceticism constitutes both the matrix of modern "sexuality"—and thus the end of a still more ancient *ars erotica*—and, at the same time, an emergent strategy for escaping sexuality's disciplinary power. Christianity—as an ensemble of "techniques" that historically produces "the desiring subject"—is, in other words, at once the problem and the promise. The problem is perhaps easier to spot. Foucault locates the distinctiveness of Christianity in the rise of a "hermeneutics of the self" resting on practices of self-examination and confession in which "the problem is to discover

what is hidden inside the self."[10] Intertwined are two sets of constraining obligations: "those regarding the faith, the book, the dogma, and the obligations regarding the self, the soul, the heart, are linked together."[11] The political context of such a doubly telling witness is no longer civic but "pastoral": self-examination and confession are structured around relations of total obedience, not to a code of law but to a divine *will*, and the goal is not the sacrifice of the citizens for the city but rather the mortification of the self ("a kind of everyday death") for the sake of "life in another world"—"a renunciation of this world and of oneself" that is at the same time "a kind of relation from oneself to oneself."[12] In this guise, ancient Christian practices of purifying self-relation are presented as the precursor to "the modern hermeneutics of the self."[13] The problem for Christianity is not (as it was in classical antiquity) penetration or domination but rather "erection," which is to say, desire itself.[14] (This uncompromisingly androcentric formulation succinctly conveys the persistent suppression of the feminine in the history of sexuality, amplified in Foucault's own *History*—a subject to which I shall return.) On Foucault's reading, ascetic Christianity—whether Augustine's or John Cassian's version[15]—initiates a trajectory of discursive ejaculation (a transformation of "sex into discourse") that eventually intersects, via the seventeenth-century confessional, with the modern practice of psychoanalysis.[16]

Having relentlessly exposed the circulation of knowledge, power, and pleasure that inheres in such a confessional sexuality, indeed having virtually equated (modern) sexuality with "power/knowledge," Foucault may appear—as Jean Baudrillard charges—to have rendered himself and his readers captive to a totalizing power of his own discursive fabrication.[17] Readers less skeptical of Foucault's argument than Baudrillard may be all the more prone to question whether it is after all possible to escape the iron grasp of this disciplinary regime on which, according to Foucault himself, our very sense of "self" depends. And if escape is not possible, from what vantage point can "sexuality" be critically engaged? This is the question raised by philosopher Judith Butler, in a sharp interrogation of Foucault's residual—and residually incoherent—emancipatory idealism.[18] "We are prisoners of the historical space of nineteenth-century psychiatry," notes philosopher and historian of science Arnold Davidson, in a more sympathetic glossing of Foucault's text. The gloss takes on a faint sheen of hope, as Davidson gives voice to the longing for liberation: "Perhaps there will come a time when we can think to ourselves, 'How do I love thee; let me count the ways,' and no longer fear our possible perversion."[19]

Foucault approaches such a possible time-to-come by a necessarily indirect route—"a long detour" into the past.[20] It is in the course of this detour, I would suggest, that the lingering opposition of "repression" and "liberation" critiqued by Butler begins to be more effectively deconstructed, giving way (however ambiguously) to a subversive reperformance of historical styles of self-formation that surface "the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself" (as Butler herself frames the desired outcome of a radically Foucaultian theory and practice).[21] Seeming both to concede and to question his own subjection to the modern discourse of sexuality that he explores in the first volume, Foucault describes his genealogical experiments in the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality* as a form of "ascesis," "an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought": "The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently." He acknowledges the "irony in those efforts one makes to alter one's way of looking at things," wondering aloud: "Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking?" Perhaps not; and yet something has shifted: "the journey rejuvenates things, and ages the relationship with oneself."[22]

Retracing the path of his own, already ancient thought, Foucault thus encounters himself from new angles. In his *History of Sexuality*, Christianity as an iterative technique of ascetic self-relation is not only the missing volume—tragically curtailed by the author's death—but also the receding frontier of a yet unthought difference. "What is expected" of ancient ascetics, Foucault reminds us in his lectures, "is humility and mortification, detachment with respect to oneself and the establishing of a relationship with oneself which tends toward a destruction of the form of the self."[23] Therein lies "the deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness, of Christian technologies of the self: no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self," he proclaims. Therein lies also the "deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness" of Foucault's positioning of Christianity, and also of his positioning of himself in relation to Christianity, I would suggest. Far from leading *inevitably* to the modern subject of sexuality, the ancient Christian discourse of desire, Foucault insists (verging on inconsistency),[24] actively refuses the "positive self" on which the modern subject is grounded; in Christianity, sacrifice rather than positivism "was the condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation."[25] Thus, for Foucault, "the texts of the early church" become, surprisingly, "'a way out' of sexuality"[26]—a "way out," in other words, of the particular modern disciplinary

regime that produces not only the concept of "sexual identity" but also the categories of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality," which are grounded in a rigid binarism of "opposite sexes." Christian asceticism is, moreover, a "way out," he implies, not only or even primarily because it is "pre-modern" but rather because it was always already resisting closure, eluding essence.

Among Foucault's earliest "spiritual masters" (paving the way for his subsequent encounter with the ancient ascetics) are his more immediate philosophical predecessors, notable among them Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot: he acknowledges his specific debts to "the former's experience of eroticism and the latter's of language, understood as experiences of dissolution, disappearance, denial of the subject (of the speaking subject and the erotic subject)."[27] In an early essay honoring Bataille through an appreciative engagement of his magisterial tome *Erotism*, Foucault is already sketching a history of sexuality. Here he initially marks the difference between a "denatured" modern sexuality and "the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin," which is linked to the "whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality" in which experiences "of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy . . . seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself."[28] At the same time, Foucault partly closes the gap between ancient traditions of Christian spirituality and the excessive reaches of modern philosophy: "The thought that relates to God and the thought that relates to sexuality are linked by a common form, since Sade to be sure, but never in our day with as much insistence and difficulty as in Bataille." In a rereading of Bataille's intertwined concepts of limit and transgression, Foucault locates "eroticism" at the transgressive edges of sexuality, in "an experience of sexuality which links, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God."[29] For Foucault, the posited "death of God" draws close to a "negative theology" while also maintaining a critical distance.[30] "Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitless into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time," he states, continuing even more paradoxically: "But correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it."[31] Transgression, he notes, still following Bataille closely, was "originally linked to the divine, or rather, from this limit marked by the sacred it opens the space where the divine functions."[32]

In modernity, Foucault observes, sexuality has been absorbed by language. He thus finds particular promise in a philosophy that "experiences

itself and its limits in language and in this transgression of language which carries it, as it did Bataille, to the faltering of the speaking subject."[33] ("I will go so far as to say that in my opinion, philosophy is also the death of language," writes Bataille, threatening—but also failing—to subside into silence. "It is also a sacrifice.")[34] In Foucault's early essay, the "philosophy" that is perched at the linguistic limits of the modern discourse of sexuality approaches the "religious eroticism" celebrated by Bataille; it also draws near to the "sacrifice of the self" that Foucault later discerns in the ancient Christian discourse of subjectivity. ("The deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest," intones Bataille. "No one can question it"—a posited limit to inquiry that seems to invite its own transgression.)[35] Is the "philosophy" here invoked by Foucault not even a kind of "theology" that anticipates his own faltering (unfinished) speaking about Christianity and also a style of "spiritual" self-formation that foreshadows his virtual appropriation of the techniques of ancient asceticism?

Foucault's asceticism has perhaps been nowhere more brilliantly illumined than in David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography.* Declaring that "the guy was a fucking saint," while at the same time testifying to the dynamics of desire and identification that infuse the authorial inscription of "sanctity" ("*Michel Foucault, c'est moi*"),[36] Halperin proceeds in his first essay to demonstrate, via the punctual style of anecdotal illustration, the coherence of thought and practice in the ascetic Life of Foucault. ("As was his speech, so was the manner of life" and "as his manner of life, so his speech": thus Eusebius recites what is already, by the end of the third century, familiar convention [*Church History* 6.3.6–7].) In a second essay, Halperin effectively refuses the temptations of narrative closure by enacting his resistance to prior biographical accounts (indeed, to the presumptions of "biography" itself) and thereby drafts an open-ended narrative of his own, a retelling of the Life avowedly fired by passion and therein locating its claim to a true witness.[37] In all these respects, Halperin follows the dictates—or perhaps rather emulates the highest ambitions—of the hagiographical tradition to which his title teasingly alludes. The Foucault whom he presents is finally not so much "gay" as "queer," proffering less an identity than a transformative strategy of resistance to the fixing of identity: "It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of renunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community."[38] Foucault's "queerness"

is, on Halperin's reading, performed by a retrieval of Greek and Roman styles of self-cultivation. "To practice a stylistics of the self ultimately means to cultivate that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends oneself: it is to elaborate the strategic possibilities of what is the most *impersonal* dimension of personal life—namely the capacity to 'realize oneself' by becoming other than what one is. This is what Foucault came to see himself as having done all his life."[39] Halperin's Foucault is thus, paradoxically, an ascetic *avant la lettre*, "before sexuality" and also before Christianity.

"It is significant that Halperin's work does not develop any of Foucault's reflections on Christian texts," as Mark Vernon notes.[40] Indeed, Halperin appears rather deliberately to *elide* Foucault's interest in Christianity, even as he represents him as an ascetic saint. Jeremy Carrette, in contrast, retraces Halperin's critical reading of Foucault's biographers, most notably James Miller, in an overt attempt to "rescue [Foucault's] silenced discussion of Christianity."[41] He suggests that "the stylization of Foucault in Miller's work, to which Halperin is so opposed, unwittingly rests on a particular religious distortion of Foucault."[42] Carrette deploys an alternate tactic, approaching Miller's work as "a negative from which to draw out the central theoretical issues underpinning Foucault's work on religion."[43] Arguing that Miller has viciously misconstrued Foucault not only as a sexual pervert (as Halperin amply demonstrates)[44] but also as a dangerous "mystic" courting a "limit-experience" in the erotic practices of sadomasochism, Carrette acknowledges nonetheless that there is insight to be extracted from the twisted strands of this account.[45] He affirms especially that "Foucault created a fascinating theological sub-text through the encounter with the avant-garde," above all Bataille (and, through Bataille, Sade).[46] However, "Foucault, like Bataille before him, suspends the mystical idea as soon as it is introduced. Foucault and Bataille are attempting to demarcate a new space in literature with inadequate old language."[47] Moreover, while "the pleasure from physical pain in martyrdom or religious suffering and S/M . . . may constitute a parallel event and hold a common denominator in the suffering body," sadomasochism and religious eroticism cannot be simply identified; nor, he implies, did Foucault make this mistake.[48]

Does Carrette protest a bit too much in his defense of Foucault, even as he also strains to "rescue" Miller's perversely "distorted" insights? Such complexly textualized ambivalence may be worth unpacking. To be sure, prior traditions of religious spirituality should not be *conflated* with more recent philosophies and practices of eroticism that similarly seek the sacred in the radical disruption of the subject through a violent traversal of the

boundaries that separate self and other, sacred and profane, life and death, pleasure and pain. More importantly, neither of these should be *conflated* with oppressive acts of violence designed to "break" the psyche. At the same time, where modern discussions of Christian asceticism remain unavoidably haunted by the specter of a widely discredited "masochism" (associations both typically dismissive and difficult simply to dismiss), a more precise articulation of the relation between asceticism and sadomasochistic eroticism would seem to be called for. Foucault's work (pace Carrette) may indeed be read as initiating such an articulation, not least through its subtle attunement to the resonance, retrieved via "genealogy," between ancient Christian asceticism and ambiguously secularized modern discourses of desire, particularly at their most excessive, self-transgressive limits.[49] It is at this point, as Carrette acknowledges, that Foucault's work intersects powerfully with the prior texts of Bataille, who observes that the experiences of both eroticism and sanctity, traversing the boundaries of historical periods, "have an extreme intensity. . . . The saint is not after efficiency. He is prompted by desire and desire alone and in this resembles the erotic man."[50]

The call for a closer—and less skittishly apologetic—consideration of the relation between sadomasochistic and ascetic eroticisms has not, in fact, gone unheeded. Karmen MacKendrick's *Counterpleasures*, a work heavily influenced by both Bataille and Foucault, responds to just such a call, lending considerable philosophical nuance to the intuition that there are significant connections to be drawn between the lives of ancient and medieval saints and the modern pursuit of "counterpleasures," dramatically instantiated in s/m eroticism, an ensemble of practices that spans (and thus blurs the boundaries between) the most esoteric reaches of intellectual theory and the most inarticulate depths of bodily practice. The erotic pleasures that interest MacKendrick "are pleasures that queer our notion of pleasure, consisting in or coming through pain, frustration, refusal. They are pleasures of exceptional intensity, refusing to make *sense* while still demanding a philosophical unfolding. This unfolding takes odd forms; that of an infinite self-reflexion or a rupture of language in the very act of description."[51] Not unlike practitioners of sadomasochistic sex, "ascetics," MacKendrick suggests, "intensify both the Christian turn against the body and the incarnate and corporeal aspects of that 'same' tradition, revealing in their practice the seductive, defiant elements of religious practice that radically problematize its disembodiment, its hierarchicality, even its misogyny."[52] (MacKendrick, unlike Bataille, perceives the limits of "erotic *man*": she notes that gender is "another of the boundaries with which [s/m] delights in playing.")[53] Drawing

attention to the inherent excessiveness of asceticism, as well as its paradoxical carnality, MacKendrick delineates the "movement of transgression by intensification" in which the (unachievable) aim is "the refusal of finitude, exhaustion, and limit—*all through the body*."[54] In and through the extremes not only of self-denial but even of self-mutilation, the ascetic, however ambivalently, pursues both pleasure and desire. Citing the argument of literary critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham, she notes that "the ascetic in fact courts temptation": "the ascetic desire for desire, and for tempting objects of desire, is strong." Ascetic desire is paradoxical, taking pleasure "both in its increase . . . and in its own violent denial," to the point that satisfaction is "removed from the picture."[55] Thus eros thrives in the refusal of the telos of satisfaction; pleasure is perversely intensified through the prolongation of pain; and worldly power is undermined, even as God's grace is provoked "through a violent defiance," in the "subtle seductions" of asceticism, MacKendrick argues.[56] A transgressive eroticism has drawn close indeed to sanctity in this perversely reverent (indeed, surprisingly theological) philosophical unfolding of the "counterpleasures."

Harpham's *Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, to which MacKendrick alludes, not only partly anticipates and affirms certain aspects of her argument, as we shall see, but also brings the study of ascetic eroticism onto a specifically literary terrain. Encompassing extended essays on Athanasius's fourth-century *Life of Antony* and Augustine's *Confessions*, Harpham's work closely aligns asceticism with textuality and, more especially, with narrativity. He locates both ascesis and narrative in the relational dynamic of temptation and resistance, which he understands as inherent in desire. "Narrative is an ascetical art of desire, an art of temptation—doubled, self-limiting, and self-resisting."[57] Here Harpham explicitly rejects the notion of desire as perpetual (limitless) motion or sheer transgression, underlining instead the dependence of desire on resistance and hence on temptation. Temptation is suspended in paradox: "in temptation, notions of transgression and limit are in force, but have not yet become identical or indivisible."[58] Narrative, as an ascetical art of desire, includes both the temptation of closure and the resistance to that temptation. "All the totalizing operations of narrative operate through resistance to de-totalizing operations; and so while narrative can organize a human life, it cannot do so simply or unequivocally, for all its coherence functions are implicated in their opposites."[59]

Narrative thus parallels, or includes, the "process of Christian self-formation" that Harpham has described earlier, which "differed from its

pagan counterpart not only in being more extreme, to the point of self-deformation, but also in being complemented by an activity of self-unforming."[60] Hagiographical narrative can thus by no means be simply identified with the interests of a phallic subjectivity, for example: "For within its fascinated concentration on the masculine, hagiography focuses on the doubling and self-subversion of the subject, in which it ceaselessly discovers gaps or concentrations of desire. In other words, hagiography both establishes the masculine program and destabilizes it, 'feminizing' the subject by exposing its enigmas of desire and even the 'masochism' of its rigors." Narrative produces both orders of coherence and "incoherence and carnivalization."[61] In hagiography, the sexed subject—the subject itself—is continually deformed, unformed, and reformed in the dynamic of a desiring resistance, a resisting desire. Harpham caps his study with a hagiographical tribute to "Saint Foucault," highlighting the power of Foucault's theories and practices of resistance, most subtly articulated in his late—and, as Harpham notes, increasingly appreciative—reengagement with ancient Christian asceticism.[62]

Having returned, with Harpham, to my initial point of departure—Michel Foucault's evocatively ambiguous placement of Christianity in the history of sexuality—I am also carried to the brink of my own literary-historical reading of the counterpleasures suffusing the Lives of Saints.

* * *

Ancient hagiography—a practice of writing intriguingly revived in contemporary engagements with Foucault—provides a promising site for excavating the charred remains of those erotic theories and practices that once fired ancient Christian discourse and that continue to smolder and spark at the transgressed edge of western modernity, not least in Foucault's own life's work. Harpham follows time-hallowed tradition in beginning the history of hagiography with Athanasius's *Life of Antony*: "The master text of Western asceticism is the *Life of Anthony*."[63] Perversely, I will begin instead with Jerome's *Life of Paul*, written roughly fifteen years later. Perhaps I am thereby resisting the temptation to inscribe closure on the narrative of hagiography by fixing its point of "origin" too securely.[64] Undoubtedly I am also seduced by Jerome's own perversity. The point is not only that a Church Father notoriously accused of a unique level of obsession with sex seems a likely ally for a historian of ancient Christianity unusually preoccupied with eroticism. More importantly, Jerome, a supremely self-conscious writer, attracts an account of hagiographical "beginnings" by stridently insisting on

his own initiative, refusing to be read as a mere follower of either Athanasius or his Latin translator Evagrius. (This is a gesture of refusal that other hagiographers will emulate: hagiography, constantly repeating itself, is always beginning again.) Jerome forces us to acknowledge the violence of creativity at work in those writerly acts of textual recycling—citation, iteration, imitation, mimicry, dislocation, translation, decomposition, fragmentation, and recombination—through which the Holy Life is produced and ever again reproduced, never quite the same as before. He refuses to conform to even a norm of his own making, authoring three remarkably different, yet (as I will show) equally "queer," Lives of male saints—Paul, Malchus, Hilarion, whose hagiographies are the focus of Chapter 1. The very aspects of these literary Lives that have most frequently irritated critics—overt inconsistency, excessive embellishment, and disjunctive narrativity—are here credited with the success of Jerome's literary-erotic project. Psychoanalytic-literary critic Leo Bersani's understanding of the "shattering of the self" aimed at in certain styles of interruptive and iterative narrativity (edgily positioned, as it happens, in relation to the theories of both Foucault and Harpham)[65] provides an illumining, if not unproblematic, theoretical intertext for such a reinterpretation of Jerome's hagiographical oeuvre. At the same time, Bersani's revision of Freud's theory of sexuality enables a rethinking of "sublimation" not as the defining characteristic of an ambiguously repressive asceticism but rather as the condition of *all* erotic desire.

Jerome also writes of women, and his encomium of his dear friend Paula will carry us into Chapter 2, where Gregory of Nyssa's fraternal *Life of Macrina* and Augustine's filial "confession" of Monica are likewise mined for traces of a distinctly "feminine" styling of sanctity. If the men's Lives considered in the first chapter can be read as resistant romances, the earliest women's Lives pivot on the eroticized death of a much-beloved subject and cleave closely to the traditions of both martyrology and letters of consolation, behind which lie funeral speeches of praise and lament. A "woman," it seems, must die in order to get a Life. The element of masochism (already conveyed in Bersani's theorizing) is here foregrounded, via the work of both MacKendrick and Lynda Hart: if psychoanalysis, as well as much popular culture, has tended to perceive women as (alas) merely *natural* masochists, hagiography radically denaturalizes the feminine as the unstable and queerly reversible site of a decidedly *perverse*, even effectively *feminist*, masochistic subjectivity that actively resists patriarchy from within the very structures of misogynistic discourse. Thus the repressed feminine returns, however ambivalently, to the history of sexuality. This chapter ends by opening a

dialogue with Jacques Derrida and Shoshana Felman regarding the position of "woman" as subject of both death and survival in testimonial literature that straddles the boundary between (male) autobiography and (female) biography.

The gendering of the subject of hagiographical writings is not neutralized (as is frequently claimed) but rather intensified, on this reading. It is also rendered remarkably unstable and fluid, as the subsequent chapters further emphasize, repeating (with a difference) the alternation between male and female Lives. The soldier and the harlot, exotically eroticized figures of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity respectively, take gender to its extremes of reversibility. Chapter 3, which considers Sulpicius Severus's repeatedly supplemented *Life of Martin*, picks up themes from the previous two chapters, suggesting that the soldier saint is not only virtually "queer" but also practically a "woman." The main emphasis, however, is on the disturbingly sadistic strain of violence in the Life, which simultaneously replicates and subverts the explosive pressures of empire, with its pervasive call to "dominate and submit"; the situation of desire within the complex hybridization of late antique Mediterranean culture is explored through engagement with (post)colonial critics Anne McClintock and Homi Bhabha.

Three Lives of "harlots"—Syrian Mary, Pelagia, and Mary of Egypt—are considered in Chapter 4. These somewhat later hagiographies are not only the least overtly martyrial but also the most explicitly "erotic" of the texts considered. (The *Life of Mary of Egypt*, in a pleasing symmetry, will return us not only to the desert but also to Jerome's *Life of Paul*.) Whereas the harlot saints have consistently been read as repenting of their transgressive sexuality, I will argue, in contrast, that their sanctity inheres in their unrepentant—if nonetheless transfigured—seductiveness. Jean Baudrillard's understanding of seduction here provides the major theoretical intervention, read explicitly against its antifeminist (as well as, implicitly, its anti-Foucaultian) grain.

The theoretical eclecticism of this approach will not, I hope, seem merely arbitrary. The "queer," the "sadomasochistic," and the "seductive" are overlapping (though by no means identical) concepts that collectively participate in a political and intellectual project that was also Foucault's—namely a reconceptualizing of eroticism that exceeds and thereby partly evades the constraints of modern "sexuality." Such an overlapped field of theorizing matches, as it has seemed to me, the similarly complex field of countererotics opened up within ancient hagiographical literature. Before addressing that literature directly, it remains for me to say a bit more about

such a posited "countererotics"—loosening, without cutting loose from, the intertextual weave of contemporary scholarship in which I have already situated this work.

Saintly love begins with resistance to the temptations of "worldly" eroticism—resistance not merely to the transient pleasures of physical intercourse (opening onto a broader realm of tempting sensory delights) but also to perduring familial and political hierarchies, institutionalized relations of domination and submission that both structure, and are structured by, relations of sex and gender. Yet such resistance to cultural norms, aptly coded in contemporary terms as "queer,"[66] does not take an anti-erotic turn, proffering the sterile safety of a desexualized "agape" in exchange for the firm repression of sexual desire. Rather, it gives rise to an exuberant art of eroticism in which the negativity harbored within resistance is eclipsed by the radical affirmation of desire also conveyed in resistance. That resistance to desire should increase desire admittedly presents a perplexing paradox. "Whence the power of what seems to be a force of sheer negation, or the pleasure of what seems to be only pain and frustration?" queries MacKendrick. "Restraint . . . is a means of intensification: it disciplines the forces of desire so that their expression is both stylized and intensified. Desire is given time to *grow*; its quick release and undoing are prevented." In the process, she suggests, "the very nature of desire" is altered: it becomes a "desire beyond subjectivity."[67] The ongoing, iterative disruption of the subject within the movement of desire emphasized by MacKendrick is, for Bersani, the primary effect of all eroticism, revealing "*jouissance* as a mode of ascesis."[68]

Ancient hagiography, I am suggesting, participates in such a self-mortifying *jouissance*, such a divinely erotic joy, in which the performative "death" of the self becomes the sanctifying matrix of life's renewal—giving rise, in the field of literature, to ever-new Lives. The self that is sacrificed as desire extends "beyond subjectivity" is a self defined by its constructed isolation or boundedness, its approach toward the sterility of stasis.[69] In holy love, "transcendence" does not complete or fulfill the self; rather, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "it cuts, it breaks, and it exposes."[70] Thus, erotic "self-shattering" differs dramatically from the "unmaking" of the self effected by techniques of torture that *intensify*—rather than *disrupt*—the isolation of the subject. As Elaine Scarry notes, in torture "the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one's self and one's world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist."[71] The pain inflicted in totalizing acts of

oppression, she argues, *shuts down* the generative processes of subjective transcendence by which humans continually create sharable, self-extending worlds. The agonizing pleasure pursued in eroticism, in contrast, *increases* transcendence to the point that the boundaries of individual subjectivity—the distinctions between the "internal" and the "external"—effectively dissolve. Such dissolution is partial and transient, though its effects may be enduring and even momentous. As Bataille observes (in an important qualification of his own pervasively, even hyperbolically, celebratory rhetoric of "sacrifice"): "Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run. What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain."[72] However, if the processes of self-destruction enacted in political torture and eroticism are thus very nearly opposite, they are also, paradoxically, tightly linked. Indeed, eroticism may be seen to mimic and thereby subvert the "shattering" operations of torture, effecting not a destruction but rather a deconstruction (thus also a reconstruction) of subjectivity, through "dissonant displacements" that reconfigure the relations between power and resistance, life and death, body and spirit, by disrupting their oppositional inscription.[73] As Nancy puts it, the "break" in the subject conveyed in the movement of love "is nothing more than a touch, but the touch is not less deep than a wound."[74] When *jouissance* is understood as "a mode of ascesis," the ascetic emerges into view as an erotically *joyful* "body in pain," disclosing suffering as the vehicle of the ongoing unmaking and remaking of worlds.[75]

For the writers of holy Lives, it is God who measures the unfurling expanse of such a sublime erotic ambition. "You need to consider where God is in this, because God's position is a sexual option," quips theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid.[76] "God's position," we might say, is at the ever-receding point where the "object" of desire withdraws and eludes the subject, thereby temporarily disrupting the subject's self-certainty in the jolt of ecstatic dispossession—a disruption that lives on in the body's memory, as MacKendrick reminds us, enabling "the knowledge, impossible without a subject, of a possibility beyond subjectivity."[77] God inheres in the paradoxical act of self-sacrifice (a sacrifice at once "God's" and "ours") that is the gift of sanctity and the lure of a love that traverses all limits. The sacrifice—which is also a seduction—is mutual and reciprocal, inscribing the irreducible relationality of God and creation. As Baudrillard puts it, "One *seduces* God with faith, and He cannot but respond, for seduction, like the challenge,

is a reversible form. And He responds a hundredfold by His grace to the challenge of faith."[78]

Is the God of the countererotic theology that I am retrieving not close kin to the God of mysticism's "negative theology," revived in the impersonal "sacred" of modern philosophers? Yes, but only insofar as there is a corresponding move within such a theology toward a "negative" or "impersonal" understanding of the human subject. Only, furthermore, insofar as the "negativity" of both God and human subjectivity marks an abysmal plenitude, and "impersonality" is seen as the effect not of the lack but of the extremity of passion, the active suffering of desire through which "personhood" is transcended and exceeded. God is encountered in the hagiographical texts in the moment when the beloved body traverses the boundary between life and death, in the saint's last, rejoicing breaths, in the disciple's lingering embrace of a corpse that already slips beyond the grasp of transient particularity—dissolving into finest dust, mingling with desert sand, participating again in the capacious potentiality of the cosmos. God is encountered in other such moments of violent traversal, transition, and reversibility, in the transvestite, the transgendered, the transfigured and disfigured subject, in the astonishing mobility and convertibility of the saint, the bottomless capacity for radical metamorphosis.[79] God appears (and also disappears) in the movement of love between and beyond persons, in the slide from the personal to the impersonal, from the self to the loss of self, from the discontinuous individual to the continuity of all existence. As Bataille puts it, the sacred or the divine—the God also glimpsed in a "negative theology founded on mystical experience"—arises in "the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite." Sacredness, grounded in sacrifice, thus aligns closely with eroticism, which likewise inheres in the revelation of continuity through the dissolution of separative selves.[80] Indeed, argues Bataille, "all eroticism has a sacramental character."[81] "Flights of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement."[82] Despite his strident critique of Christianity, Bataille understands his own work on eroticism as "nearer to 'theology' than to scientific or religious history."[83] (Thus it is that it can be so easily drawn into the citational weave of a work of "religious history" that itself draws near to "theology.")

The transpersonal God of negative theology continues, however, to yield intermittently to the shifting play of personifications within the Christian theological imaginary, in the context of a tradition that has remained, for the most part, not only productively "positive" in its metaphorical

strategies but also persistently anthropocentric in its erotic fantasies. (Though we should not fail to note the fertile caves and springs, deserts, forests, and mountaintops, the fauns and centaurs, he-lions and she-wolves haunting the borders of the hagiographical texts.) In a recent theological act of self-proclaimed "indecency," Althaus-Reid does not negate but rather multiplies the "sexual option" of a personified "God's position," reciting a parodically perverse aretalogy: "God, the Faggot; God, the Drag Queen; God, the Lesbian; God, the heterosexual woman who does not accept the constructions of ideal heterosexuality; God, the ambivalent, not easily classified sexuality."[84] The theologian's tone is here both vividly ironic and deadly serious. In the inevitable interplay between life stories and theologies, she wonders, "can we keep carrying the burden of a theology which leaves us alone when having sex?"[85] The "we" whom Althaus-Reid invokes is a deliberately provocative (but not random or unconsidered) collectivity of transgressively desiring subjects, including lemon vendors without underwear, adulterers, sadomasochists, and transvestites. Her recounting of the "sexual stories" of everyday saints repeats the challenge of hagiography—to pursue God in the extremities of human striving.[86]

A divine sexual orientation courts transcendence through the risk of transgression; its sublimity far exceeds the bounds established by the concept of a de-eroticized "sublimation"; its goal is not the chastening of the sexual subject but rather the seduction of salvific grace through the sacrifice of a "self" reified—and thus entombed—in its very "sexuality"; its literary expression refuses the temptation of a reductive detachment of historical facts and carnal acts from the ethereal flights of fantasy upon which all desire is borne. In the Lives of Saints, we are able to perceive the crucial intersection of eroticism and theology. There we encounter no "safe sex" but only risks worth taking. (That the risks are *all too real* is evidenced by long histories not only of sexual repression but also of political oppression enacted in the name of God's desire.) There we encounter no "sexual orthodoxy" but only the continually reperformed trial of historical witnesses testifying passionately to the possibility of divine eros—which is to say, to the twinned (intertwined) possibilities of *God* and of *love.*

Such theoretical and theological reflections are conveyed by the historical argument that undergirds this book. The readings of ancient texts that follow adhere to a rough chronological order. They are not, however, intended to inscribe a narrative of internal development but rather to expose (albeit incompletely) the complex and shifting intertextual weave of a late ancient literary practice. To the extent that hagiography "tends toward

a destruction of the form of the self," as Foucault describes Christian asceticism, the writing, and thus also the reading, of Holy Lives must be understood as an open, ever unfinished and unstable enterprise: an interpretive teleology should be courted, but also refused, at every turn.[87] In ancient hagiographical literature, sacrifice—here understood as the resistance of narrative closure—is "the condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation." What is true for the Lives themselves is also true for the history of Lives, which (I am suggesting) ought not surrender to the temptation to emplot the monolinear evolution of a definite "genre." Nonetheless, chronology—or rather, the specificity of context and the logic of temporality illumined by historical analysis—is not irrelevant to my broader interest in inserting the hagiographical texts into the history of sexuality. The (meta)historical account here introduced through a recapitulation of Foucault's genealogical project will continue to haunt the peripheral vision of the subsequent readings.

It is scarcely an accident that the incitement to hagiographical discourse arises within the charged and contested transculturalism of a late Roman empire perched at the edge of antiquity. Nor is it an accident that interest in a hagiographical erotics reemerges within our own similarly "multicultural," ambiguously "postcolonial," even possibly "postmodern" context.[88] We too are perched at a temporal edge (or so we imagine it), awash in an ocean of heteroglossia (in the academy and well beyond), sharply aware of the complex and mobile relations of power that infuse all of our practices (literary, erotic, and otherwise). Hagiography is a historical product, a queer, late version of the ancient novel, emerging at the intersections of romance with biography, historiography, panegyric, martyrology—a statement that does not so much define its genre as announce its persistent subversions of genre, its promiscuous borrowings, its polyphonous multiplication of contesting (and thus always compromised) voices, its subtle and ever-shifting resistances within power, its layered remappings of place and replottings of time, its repeated traversals of the boundaries of history and fiction, truth and lies, the realms of the sacred and the profane.[89] What will we late- or postmodern readers (re)discover in such texts? Will the encounter "result in a different way of thinking," as Foucault frames the question for himself?[90] Will it result, indeed, in a different way of *loving*? Such is the hopeful desire that infuses my own readerly detour through the ancient Lives of Saints.

Chapter 1

Fancying Hermits: Sublimation and the Arts of Romance

Sublimation is coextensive with (rather than "beyond") sexuality.
—*Leo Bersani,* The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art

"How often, when I was living in the desert, in the vast solitude which gives to hermits a savage dwelling-place, parched by the flames of the sun, how often did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome (*putavi me Romanis interesse deliciis*)!" (Ep. 22.7). Thus begins Jerome's account of his own brief career as a hermit, intruded into a letter written to the Roman virgin Eustochium circa 384, some eight years after he had decisively fled the Syrian desert. In this passage, ascetic fantasy quickly overwhelms historical description. Still inventing himself in the present, Jerome's interest in his own past lies largely with the power of the imagination to shape—and reshape—a human life.[1] His autobiographical confession unfolds in a series of dreamily shifting scenes, as vibrant in emotional tone as they are rich in sensory detail. The remembered landscape conveys the tenor of the former life, even as the terrain of memory itself buckles and folds: in the desert he once fancied Roman allurements; in Rome he now fancies desert delights. Mobile displacements of pleasures thus make space for desire while transforming both topography and chronology.[2] Defined by mutual lack, desert and Rome, past and present, become (by mutual attraction) almost one topos, a savage habitation that is also the no-place where a sublime eros burns bright.[3]

As Jerome rewrites his past, he reinscribes the desert on his body, roughly effacing the soft pallor of Rome: "my skin from long neglect had become like Ethiopian flesh (*squalida cutis situm Aethiopicae carnis adduxerat*)." The scene bends back on itself, as his savagely "burning mind"—itself a desert product—in turn converts the almost intolerably bleak solitude of sandy wastes into a stage crowded with foregone delights: "I often found myself amidst bevies of girls (*choris . . . puellarum*)," he reminisces boldly (Ep. 22.7). In this fantastic desert that is also the site of Roman pleasures, Jerome appears virtually indistinguishable from the voluptuous bands of chorus girls, a confusion not repressed but intensified by the text. His skin

weathered in the sun-scorched desert, the hermit has become as dark—and perhaps thereby as beautiful—as the sun-scorched bride of the Song of Songs (cf. Song 1.6),[4] whose naked desire he will, later in this same letter, commend to the girl Eustochium in terms exceeding even the Song's abundant eroticism (Ep. 22.25).[5] First, however, he abandons himself fleetingly to a still more exuberant identification with another sensuously, indeed sinfully, female biblical figure: "Helpless, I cast myself at the feet of Jesus, I watered them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair, and then I subdued my rebellious body with weeks of abstinence" (cf. Luke 7.38). Beating his breast and weeping copiously in the queerly feminized and darkly exoticized literary persona of his own construction,[6] Jerome quickly returns to the opening verses of the Song of Songs, now with an explicit citation, as he sings joyously to his Lord: "because of the scent of thy ointments we will run after thee" (Ep. 22.7; cf. Song 1.3). The words of the Song's lover and her maidens, directly voiced by Jerome, thus supplement the account of foot washing. The fragrant oils initially elided in his abstinent citation of the Lukan text mingle again with the foot washer's tears, and the mutely weeping woman is fractured, pluralized, and dispersed in dancing choruses of maidenly celebration—"bevies of girls" fit to accompany the Savior's bride, none other than Jerome himself, now more than ever one of the girls.[7] Authorial "fancy" is no longer worldly but rather densely biblical, as Jerome refashions his desire ascetically by rewriting the desert as a voluptuous scriptural text, thereby also reinscribing Scripture as a teeming desert of delights. Fact or fantasy? History or romance? *Sexuality or sublimation*? In the text of his own recollected life, Jerome dissolves such distinctions.

What of Jerome's *other* Lives—the holy biographies of Paul, Malchus, and Hilarion? "Are the Lives romances?" queried E. Coleiro in 1957, wondering aloud "whether Jerome meant the Lives to be considered as history or fiction." Skittishly, Coleiro concludes that, although Jerome certainly cannot have intended that his saintly biographies be read as novels, they do make for rather bad history while exuding considerable "romantic charm."[8] Coleiro stands in a tradition of scholarship that has attempted to discipline Jerome's disturbingly labile hagiographic compositions by giving them a respectable place within literary history, identifying them as variations on conventional genres of history, biography, or aretalogy and keeping the romance's troubling fictionality (not to mention its seemingly unmentionable eroticism) at arm's length wherever possible.[9] His sensitive reading of the Hieronymian Lives, however, partly subverts his own conclusion. In order to classify Jerome's Lives as "history"—or, more specifically, "biography"—he must

demonstrate the (lamentable?) compatibility of "the more fanciful methods of Jerome" with contemporaneous historiography, which seemingly admitted "the possibility of non-historical additions," blurring the "line between reality and legend," introducing details that served a prurient curiosity more than a desire for accuracy, and frequently sacrificing narrative coherence for the vividness of swiftly shifting scenes that remain loosely linked, at best, not only with one another but also with the broader trajectory of "contemporary history."[10] "It is like the disconnected glimpses of a hidden sky that one would get if a cloud covering the whole length and breadth of it were to break up in parts and let one see a few patches of what is beyond," muses Coleiro.[11] Idealized "heroes" are dramatically depicted and "overstress is conspicuous," he continues.[12] Indeed, Jerome's Lives, with "their appeal to the imagination and their romantic associations," are (he admits) "delightful works of art." If not quite granting them the status of "romances," Coleiro is willing to catalogue their distinctly "romantic" aspects: "the use of the weird," the delight in presenting "the reader continually with unexpected situations," "the spirit of adventure," and above all the "taste for description."[13] Jerome is especially adept, as Coleiro reads him (reading him well), at using description to convey a particular *feeling*: "the reader sees the scene under the influence of that sentiment."[14] Nonetheless, "there is no doubt that [Jerome] intended the Lives to be considered as history." "Such considerations lead us to reject the opinion that the Lives are romances," intones Coleiro; "fundamentally, they represent historical truth."[15]

As a hagiographer, Jerome is, then, a master of romance but a lousy historian. All the same, we must read him for his history and resist the lure of his romance, eschewing "entertainment" in favor of "information," insists Coleiro. A dauntingly ascetic interpretive practice is here recommended. And perhaps we would do well to take the advice, even to take it to excess. Reading "romance" as "history" and writing "history" as "romance" may indeed be the genre-bending technique by which Jerome not merely blurs but effectively dissolves the distinction between "reality and legend" (or fantasy)—thereby rendering the concept of an extratextual "historical truth" virtually irrelevant. Ascetic "(in)formation," grounded in refusing the tempting reduction of "imagination and feeling" to a merely "entertaining" superficiality, may be exactly what Jerome intends for his readers.[16]

But what clues does Jerome himself offer us concerning his hagiographic intentions? As it happens, the three canonical Hieronymian Lives are all mentioned in the self-entry with which Jerome immodestly concludes his catalogue of Christian writers, entitled *On Famous Men*. Why not, then,

begin there in re-posing the question of the hagiographer's generic purposes? Jerome's interest in this innovative literary-historical composition does not lie in correlating Christian writings with "Gentile" genres but rather in delineating the emerging corpus of distinctly Christian literature (*On Famous Men*, preface) and the rise of a new class of Christian men of letters—best represented by Jerome himself.[17] This overt authorial agenda, however, is not necessarily a problem. It may even offer valuable clues for students of Jerome's hagiography, inciting fresh interpretations of what is perhaps after all best read as a "new" kind of writing—created not ex nihilo but through inventive recyclings of materials borrowed from already overlapped traditions of historical, biographical, aretalogical, martyrological, and novelistic literature. Jerome's list of his own written works—presumably chronological—begins with the *Life of Paul the Hermit* and concludes (apart from a final, looser reference to his Bible translations, countless unpublished letters to Paula and Eustochium, and work-in-progress) with the works *On the Captive Monk* and *The Life of the Blessed Hilarion* (*On Famous Men* 135). Two of his conventionally identified hagiographies are, then, also designated by their author as Lives. Taking the form of a rhetorical *inclusio*, they neatly bracket the list of Jerome's polemical treatises, published letters, and historical, exegetical, and homiletic writings. If the Lives seem thus to claim a certain prominence in his own oeuvre, it is striking that Jerome credits only one among his Christian literary predecessors, namely, Athanasius of Alexandria, with authorship of a Life—the *Life of Antony the Hermit* (*On Famous Men* 87).[18] Does Jerome understand the ascetic Life as a distinctive Christian literary "genre," and, if so, where does this "genre" originate, what does it include, and how does he intend it to be read?

The hints supplied by *On Famous Men* draw us into the hagiographic texts themselves. In introducing the earliest of his Lives, the *Life of Paul* (written circa 374), Jerome acknowledges that it is "partly true" that Antony was the "originator" or "head" (*caput*) of eremitic asceticism. "Partly I say," he clarifies, "for the fact is not so much that Antony preceded the rest as that they all derived from him the necessary stimulus (*ab eo omnium incitata sunt studia*)." Jerome goes on to make it abundantly clear that Paul of Thebes, the hero of his own Life, did, in his view, precede Antony as the "leader" or "first" (*princeps*) in the eremitic venture (*Life of Paul* 1). In what sense, then, can Antony be understood as the "originator" or the "stimulus" for the ascetic endeavors of "all"? Jerome, I would suggest, has here deliberately confused the "Life" with the "life": his subtly displaced, but easily recognizable, claim is that it is the textual *Life of Antony* (transmitted by "both

Greek and Roman writers," as he goes on to note),[19] rather than the hermit Antony's living example, that provides the "stimulus" or "incitement" not to asceticism per se but, more importantly, to *hagiography*. We should not miss the payoff of this rhetorical sleight of hand. In the *Life of Paul*, Jerome implicitly inscribes the *Life of Antony* as a "source" (a reading that will prove extraordinarily influential)[20] only so that he—thus incited—may make himself the "first" author of holy Lives.[21] His seeming compliment to Athanasius, who remains unnamed here and elsewhere in Jerome's Lives (if not in his catalogue of Christian writers), is thus written with the left hand. If hagiography is a genre, from Jerome's perspective it is a genre of his own imaginative invention. Athanasius's work is merely the provocation—the pretext, one might say.[22]

Indeed, if Hieronymian hagiography is a genre, it is a genre always being invented. The Lives of Paul and Hilarion are intertextually linked through their common (if also strategically differentiated) construal of the *Life of Antony* as their literary point of departure—a linkage further strengthened by the explicit reference to the *Life of Paul* in the *Life of Hilarion*. The same is not true of *On the Captive Monk*. Yet this not-quite-*Life of Malchus* sidles up cozily enough to the *Life of Hilarion* in Jerome's *On Famous Men*, and indeed the oriental setting and overt historicism of *On the Captive Monk* (described by Jerome as a warm-up exercise for a future church-historical narrative) may be seen to anticipate the *Life of Hilarion*'s ambition to convey a broad history of eastern monasticism in which Syria-Palestine takes its rightful place. At the same time, *On the Captive Monk* is arguably the least metahistorical and most explicitly romantic of Jerome's three saintly biographies, reproducing the plot line and rhetorical style of the ancient novel with parodic near-exactitude. In these respects, it draws closer to the *Life of Paul*, while also sharply distancing itself from the latter's mythical flights of fancy, as well as from the focus on the miraculous characteristic of the *Life of Hilarion*. The point is that Jerome's hagiographic writings exceed and contradict even his own lightly insinuated generic definitions and refuse, collectively, to stabilize into a single literary form. Previous scholarly studies strongly suggest (not least where failing to achieve consensus) that the Lives are each generic hybrids, emerging in the interplay of already distinctly hybridized literary genres. Beyond that, I am suggesting, these ambiguously overlapped texts are also remarkably dissimilar to one another, to put it simply. Nor can their differences be easily smoothed away by plotting a linear development toward a single, culminating "end."[23] The reader of Jerome's three hagiographic compositions is, rather, left with

the impression of an ongoing, even restless experimentation at work in these texts.

Hieronymian hagiography is, thus, a remarkably plastic genre. Possibly it is even a genre defined by its irreducible plasticity, which (by effectively refusing the contrast with "real life") exposes and exploits the promising fictiveness and malleability of *any* "life," remaining stubbornly resistant even to literary devices of normalization. Fact or fantasy? History or romance? What *is* a true story, who *is* a holy man? These are questions that Jerome's saintly Lives continue to incite, while successfully deferring conclusive answers. At this point, a "deferential" (which is also to say, a "differential") reading of Hieronymian hagiography may be just what is required, for would-be saints and other shifty subjects of phantasmatic desire. There is, there can be, no end to the incitement to write and read holiness, to discover new "queerings" of romance,[24] further intensifications of erotic longing within the operations of sublimation. From Jerome's perspective (as I here imagine it), there are always more Lives to be found and lost—multiplied, fractured, and destroyed—in the savage (dis)habitation, the prolific specula(riza)tions, of hagiography's fluid literary imaginary.

The Queer Life of Paul the Hermit

> *Both art and criticism compensate for the surrender of physical sexuality by providing imaginative gratifications that have their own attractiveness. Freud argued that beauty . . . represented a sublimation of sexuality, a rerouting of transgressive energies along socially acceptable lines; and while this seems a decidedly modern view of the matter, I would argue that we can in fact locate the germ of sublimation, the beginnings of a modern understanding, in ascetic art and its cultural interpretation. As one among countless examples, I want to focus on a picture by Sasetta (c.1400–1450) . . . depicting . . . the meeting between Antony and Paul the Hermit. . . . The compensation I am hunting for does not withhold itself, for the meeting between the two saints represents a momentary relief from the intense solitude suffered by each; their holy embrace provides, in fact, not only an affirmation of the worthiness of the ascetic life, but an astonishing interval of sensation, an unrepeatable break amid the unrelieved decades of self, or rather the denial of self. . . .*
>
> *The dominant form of the painting is surely the arch; and it is replicated everywhere . . . as if their embrace replicated and brought into the human world not only a principle of affection, but also a principle of*

> *natural form. . . . Still, one cannot help noticing that the position of the embrace itself is highly unnatural in the sense that it is clumsy, almost impossibly awkward, bad for aging backs. Why do they assume this queer posture?*
>
> —*Geoffrey Harpham, "Asceticism and the Compensations of Art"*

While setting the scene for the *Life of Paul the Hermit* (the "original" behind Sasetta's painting), Jerome reflects—with seeming inconsequentiality—on those techniques of torture designed "to destroy not bodies, but souls" (*Life of Paul* 2).[25] He supplies two exemplary anecdotes, each guaranteed to make the malice of Satan memorable. The first involves an already well-tested martyr whom "the devil ordered to be covered in honey and set out in the heat of the sun, with his hands tied behind his back," his cruel intent that "one who had survived fiery plates yield to the stinging bites of flies." The reader is left to wonder about the fate of the honey-dipped sufferer,[26] as Jerome rushes on to recount a still more titillating tale of diabolical torture and Christian witness. Although the second victim (described as being "in the flower of his manhood") is set in the shade of a lovely garden, this young man, we quickly learn, is destined to burn as well. "There, among the radiant lilies and blushing roses, next to a gently murmuring stream, while the wind softly whispered among the leaves of the trees, the youth was placed upon a bed of feathers and, so that he might not escape, bound with caressing garlands and then left alone." Attracted like a fly to honey, a beautiful prostitute soon arrives on the scene of Jerome's artful confabulation. Binding the youth more tightly than ever with her twining embraces, the *meretrix* goes so far as to stroke his virile member with her hands, explains Jerome (surrendering shudderingly to his own vulgarity, as he naughtily voices "what is wicked even to say"). Having palpably excited the young man's desire, the woman throws herself on top of him, and the "wanton *victrix*" is thereby on the verge of overthrowing his virtue. Not surprisingly, Jerome's martyr—Christ's soldier—"knows not what to do and where to turn." (Bound and mounted, he does not have much room to maneuver.) In the nick of time, divine inspiration strikes: the resourceful youth bites off his own tongue and spits it into the face of the woman as she kisses him. Pain surmounts lust, as Jerome remarks briefly, and thus we arrive at the bittersweet conclusion deferred in the first tale of bondage and biting—or so it seems (3). (It must be noted, however, that neither of these "martyrs" has managed to die.) Having diverted his readers long enough with such apparently digressive narratives, Jerome can now make a brisk transition to

his main plot, explaining how the young Paul of Thebes—a contemporary of the two martyrs—came to invent asceticism while fleeing the temptations of persecution (4–5).[27]

It is a queer way to begin a saintly Life—more than that, a queer way to launch a competitive writing career, which is what Jerome is doing in this first, overt attempt to upstage the Athanasian *Life of Antony*.[28] The author is baiting his reader, but what kind of bait is he dangling, and what is to be delivered in its place? Jerome's *Life of Paul* is pervaded throughout by a bait-and-switch dynamic, and the deliciously teasing opening vignettes are, I would argue, more crucial to the text's constitutive mobilities than is commonly acknowledged by commentators apparently embarrassed to find themselves so easily seduced.[29] Despite the note of triumph on which he seems to conclude, Jerome's preliminary tales of torture are neither climactic nor anticlimactic but rather disturbingly open-ended and thus—having failed to demarcate their own limits—not, strictly speaking, "pre-liminary" at all. The first, incomplete narrative of martyrdom has already given way to the second, acquiring a supplement rather than coming to a conclusion; similarly, as the hard-bitten tongue of a mute renunciation is offered in place of manhood's more fluent ejaculations—as a painful pleasure is exchanged for a pleasurable pain—the ascetic life of Paul emerges as both a prolongation and a disruptive repetition of the martyr's tantalizingly arrested desire. In addition, Jerome has already warned that the account of Paul's career will itself be fragmentary, interrupted by a telling lacuna—the huge expanse of Paul's middle years, declared definitively inaccessible. Proceeding thus by fits and starts, shifting across gaps and intervals, and yet never really leaving anything behind, this nearly trackless narrative seems to consist solely in a series of switchbacks. In fact, I would go farther still: Jerome's *Life of Paul* is a purposefully torturous text that intends to "destroy souls," again and again; its interruptive and repetitive narrativity contributes to the (paradoxical) work of psychic deformation,[30] restlessly resisting the fixation of identity; it contributes thereby to the production of a queerly pure desire, whose end of self-dissolution turns out to be no end at all.

If we take the risk and read this Life, we must start by backtracking to the garden, for only when we have taken *that* bait can we make the switch to another fantastically paradisal scene, where we will eventually (and repeatedly) find (and lose) Paul. Lingering a bit longer with the enticing youth of Jerome's second martyrial exemplum, we might now note that he has, by the end, swapped tongues with the prostitute: Tertullian, for one, is familiar with the famous case of the "Athenian courtesan" convicted of conspiracy

who, "subjected to torture by the tyrant," "still making no betrayal," "at last bit off her own tongue and spat it in the tyrant's face, that he might be convinced of the uselessness of his torments, however long they should be continued" (Tertullian, *To the Martyrs* 4).[31] The heroic tongue biting is thus not *merely* a euphemism for self-castration—a reading so teasingly available, so nearly literal, that it is almost thereby disabled, for the martyr does *not* after all give up his manly parts. Nor is the tongue-biting *merely* a reinscription of the seductress as the castrating agent, encased in a fantasy in which a man may take matters into his own teeth, thereby regaining a position of control. As the tale of the Athenian courtesan (not to mention the still more notorious case of Philomela) reminds us,[32] the youth's tongue-biting (upon which Jerome's readers hang with ba(i)ted breath) is crucially *also* an act of gender-switching, for only a female can truly lose her tongue, in the terms of cultural codes already ancient by Jerome's day.[33] A real man minds his tongue, able both to speak freely and to sustain a noble silence, whereas a woman, never in full possession of language (never fully possessed by language), can only finally control her tongue by destroying it, thereby attaining an almost absolute eloquence in perfect silence. If it is, then, a woman's tongue that sprouts in the youth's mouth in the ecstatic moment of its own leaping death, what of his *virilia*?[34] In Jerome's garden, the flowering member of manhood can, like its feminized lingual counterpart, be forced to betray truths better choked back—and therefore perhaps better bitten off and spit out once and for all, after all (after all is said and done). But what might that mean? From the youth to the prostitute, from the womanly tongue to the manly "tongue" and back again, along the series of switchbacks, we are invited to traverse the imagined scene. By the time we take the bait, by the time we *bite*, Jerome's martyr is neither intact in his manhood nor simply emasculated (the exchanges enacted in this text already result in something more complex than "feminization"); he is no longer either the bottom or the top; his triumph is also his surrender. This witness is located in the gaps, in the fragments, in the very mobility of his shifting desire. And if he has become mute, perhaps he is also, like Philomela, a weaver of a secret text, bearer of desire, carrying us . . . where? Well, for the moment, toward the young Paul.

It seems almost by accident that Paul—"proceeding step by step, sometimes advancing, sometimes retreating, sometimes retracing his steps" (5)—discovers the secret cave that was to become the permanent home of the man who thereby fashioned himself as "the first hermit" (1). "It is human desire to discover what is hidden," observes Jerome, as he describes Paul's

removal of the stone and avid exploration of the cave's interior—which expands wondrously, as if to accommodate Paul's desire, opening to the sky, extending with the reaching branches of a palm tree, encircling a neatly contained stream. We are back in a garden, then. This time, it is a garden seemingly safely enclosed, the site of Paul's future self-sufficiency—and yet it also contains a few untidy nooks and crannies, littered with a strange debris of ancient parts and rusted tools. "Egyptian records report that this place was a clandestine mint dating from the time Antony was joined to Cleopatra," Jerome informs us authoritatively (5). What is intruded with this fragment of detailed "realism"?[35] By means of another narrative break and twist, the presence of "Antony" will soon be explained, but how are we to read the "Cleopatra" with whom he is, or will be, "joined"? Retreating, we discover the Egyptian prostitute who threatens to unman the martyr with the force of his own desire. Advancing, we encounter Paul, approached step by step, along the path of Antony's desire. Martyr and *meretrix*, Antony and Cleopatra,[36] Antony and Paul—so many switchbacks, both connective and disruptive, along the tortuous track of this tale.

Creating yet another small diversion by introducing comparative corroboration of Paul's miraculously restricted diet (consisting at this point solely of dates [6]), Jerome can then pretend to resume his account of Paul's life. In the meantime, he has opened and leaped yet another gap in his text. Now Paul—last sighted in adolescence—is 113 years old, and it is the relatively youthful Antony (a mere 90) who is roaming the sun-baked desert in pursuit of hidden things (7). Having been summoned by a dream to seek one who is a better monk than he, Jerome's Antony seems still, in his waking state, to traverse a dreamscape, "mother" of mythical figures that become literalized as signifiers while remaining oversaturated with sense—"hyper-icons,"[37] black holes of density in the text that threaten to suck the reader into their unplumbable depths, even as they also propel the narrative forward, luring us on, with Antony.

The first such figure that Antony encounters is a "human mixed with horse," to which "the fancy of poets assigns the name 'hippocentaur,'" notes Jerome (7). Patricia Cox Miller glosses the text further, pointing out that centaurs were "noted for two traits in particular: their hyper-masculine and violent sexuality, and their hostility to what the Greeks saw as foundational norms of culture."[38] Antedating not only marriage but also sexual difference itself, as Miller reminds us, the centaur belongs to an ancient, all-male realm of pure and undifferentiated "nature" while simultaneously functioning as the guardian of divinely transmitted arts of healing, music, and prophecy.[39]

With a gestured sign of his own sealed salvation, Antony protects himself from the portentous implications of such an alarming encounter. Addressing the beast sternly, he demands to know where the "servant of God" dwells. The hybrid creature is as mute as the tongueless martyr: "The beast gnashed its teeth and tried to speak clearly, but only ground out from a mouth shaking with bristles some kind of barbarous sounds rather than lucid speech." Before it vanishes from the text, however, it extends its right hand in a telling gesture of its own, thereby indicating unerringly to Antony "the sought-for route." Here Jerome pauses briefly to raise the question of "whether the devil himself took on the shape of this creature, thus to terrify Antony, or whether the desert, typically capable of engendering monsters (*monstruosorum animalium ferax*), also gave birth (*gignat*) to this beast." He concludes lightly: "we are uncertain" (7). Jerome's deceptively casual tone partly masks the shocking effects of his interjected "uncertainty":[40] insinuating indifference, he blurs the line between demonic perversion and desert fecundity; with a shrug of his writerly shoulders, he simultaneously creates an interval of difference between the disseminator of illusion and the matrix of myth (between lies and fiction)—even as he potentially narrows the gap between the maternalized earth and the father's cave.

At this point, Jerome's text—which is also to say, Jerome's expansively intertextual desert[41]—swiftly perpetuates itself by yet another inexact repetition. No sooner has Antony resumed his journey than he encounters a dwarf, a homunculus, "whose nostrils were joined together, with horns growing out of his forehead, and with the legs and feet of a goat" (8). As Miller points out, this figure—who confesses himself the member of a race commonly identified as "fauns, satyrs, and incubi"—"reduplicate[s] the centaur" in such a way as to highlight the "hybrid character of the inhabitants indigenous to the desert" while also underlining their hypermasculine sexuality, "by definition nonfamilial and wild."[42] "Stepping forward," Antony finds himself drawn a step closer to the uncanny creature, who offers him dates and identifies himself as a "mortal being"—that is, a virtual human—and also a fellow follower of Christ, leaving Antony both to weep with joy and to "marvel that he could comprehend the dwarf's speech." Do Antony and the homunculus, then, speak with the same tongue? Are they "brothers"? If the appearance of the stereotypically randy figure of the satyr in an ascetic text is itself sufficiently astonishing, the implications of this friendly exchange are almost unthinkable. Indeed, Jerome again expertly interrupts the narrative line before the thought can be completed: the satyr is gone in a flash, disappearing from sight as quickly as the centaur (8). Facing a

flickeringly specular desert that has grown "vast" indeed, Antony—like the martyr overwhelmed by his wanton seducer—"knows not what he should do and in what direction he should turn" (9).

A third guide appears, "a she-wolf, panting with thirst," who crawls toward the foot of a mountain, where she enters a cave. Antony, perhaps panting too, follows her first with his eyes and then with his feet, his curiosity unsatisfied by his initial glimpse of the dim interior. "Truly, as the Scripture says, 'Perfect love drives out fear,'" comments Jerome: where pain displaced the martyr's lust, love now displaces the hermit's fear, and Antony advances "step by step" in the darkness, "sometimes standing still." He hears a sound, he perceives a light; stumbling, he creates a sound, and shy Paul (who, of course, waits at the heart of this cave), hearing a sound too, shuts and bolts his door. Performing his role flamingly in this almost parodically groping rite of courtship, Antony prays for hours on end for entrance, pronouncing himself "known" by Paul, acknowledging his unworthiness, and threatening nonetheless not to leave until he has seen his beloved. "You who receive wild beasts, why do you turn down a man?" he cries, and the distinction between man and beast, already doubly disrupted by centaur and satyr, dissolves further, even as Antony attempts flailingly to reassert his difference—now seemingly inscribed as a *sexual* difference (for it is presumably the she-wolf whom Paul has admitted). But if Antony is here (as Pierre Leclerc whimsically proposes) playing Romeo to Paul's Juliet, does his perversely ardent love—inverting the logic of pederasty—not make the younger man "a little more ridiculous"?[43] "I have sought and I have found; I knock that it may be opened," he proclaims.[44] "If I do not obtain my request, I shall die right here in front of your door. Then surely you will at least bury my corpse." Antony's final, nearly prophetic vow is, as we shall see, perhaps as much his desire as his threat. He begs Paul to open his cave, even if only to receive his death, to bury his corpse (9).[45]

Paul, teasing and laughing more like a courtesan than a hermit, finally opens. "Do you wonder that I do not let you in, when you threaten to die?" he quips merrily (9). The two embrace, call each other by name, and fervently offer thanks to God. Giving Antony a "sacred kiss," Paul displays his body—the body, as Miller suggests, of a desert "wild man,"[46] covered with unkempt hair, and also the body of a hybrid creature, straddling the boundary between life and death, nearly a corpse, shortly to be in need of burial. "You see before you a man soon to become dirt," he declares. Antony apparently likes what he sees. The two gossip sweetly. Unlike (and thus also like) the satyr, Paul serves no dates from his palm. Instead, a raven drops a fat

loaf of bread into their laps and flies quickly away again—another fragment, or figment, in Jerome's prolific desert imaginary (10). Sitting by the spring, the two men argue for a full day over who will be the first to break the bread. Finally, in yet another comical moment, they determine to pull at the loaf simultaneously—neither will be first, neither will top—and then, after eating, they drink companionably from the spring.[47] Once again offering thanks to God, they spend the night together—"in watchful prayer," of course. The morning after, Paul delivers his painful news: the time of his death has arrived. "You have been sent by the Lord to cover my wretched body with soil, returning earth to earth," he informs his new friend (11). Antony—whose words at the cave's entrance have been returned to him in reverse, along another of the shifty switchbacks of Jerome's text—weeps and begs Paul not to leave him, "but to welcome him, Antony, as a companion for the great journey." In reply, Paul merely asks that Antony go back to fetch the cloak Athanasius has given him,[48] "to serve as a shroud for my body." Jerome explains Paul's real motivation: "he wanted Antony to leave him," so that he could "lighten the burden of grief Antony would bear at his death" (12). But perhaps Jerome's account is not as straight as it seems: the anticipated death and burial have the makings of a marriage, as we shall see, and Antony's temporary banishment will allow him to replicate the expectant motions of his journey; desire will once more be prolonged, while Paul, simultaneously coy and welcoming, prepares (again) to celebrate his meeting with Antony, in the desert that has become a queer kind of Paradise. ("Truly have I seen Paul in Paradise," Antony will explain to his brethren back at home [13].)

Driving his body to the limits of its strength, Antony returns quickly with the cloak. "He thirsted for Paul, he longed to see Paul, he concentrated his entire attention on Paul." (We recall the she-wolf, thirsting, crawling forward.) Just a few short hours from his goal, he receives a vision of Paul ascending to heaven. Grieving, Antony cries out in the unmistakable language of a lover, "Paul! Why do you abandon me? Why do you leave without saying good-bye? So late in my life I met you; so soon do you depart?" (14). Paul still has a surprise or two up his tattered sleeve, however. Antony reaches the cave to find the hermit's body erect, in prayer. Thinking him still alive, he attempts to join him in mutual devotions. But Paul is indeed dead, and Antony, now accepting that death, embraces and kisses a corpse that still knows the appropriate posture for thanksgiving (15). Wrapping Paul's body in the cloak and carrying it outside to the accompaniment of his own hymns and psalms (thereby taking on a traditionally feminine role

in the rites for the dead—and perhaps also in the preparation of a bride for her marriage), Antony remembers that he does not have the necessary tool for digging a grave. Fresh grief at this lack gives way to wonder, as Jerome performs another breathtakingly mobile multiplication and shift between portentous signs. "From out of the deep desert came running two lions with their manes streaming back from their shoulders." Lion- (or lioness-) to-the-rescue is already a stock motif in Christian as well as non-Christian tales[49] (and this is not the last time Jerome himself will turn the trick)—but two such splendidly masculine creatures, racing together in such perfect co-ordination, thrashing their tails and roaring their lamentations in tandem, is almost more than a man could ask for. "Competing with each other to excavate the sand" (like Paul and Antony arguing and tugging at the bread), this odd couple neatly dig Paul's grave and then humbly gesture their desire to receive Antony's blessing, which he joyfully grants (16).

Alone again with Paul, Antony buries the corpse, covering it with desert sand, with which it will mingle, according to Paul's prediction: "You see before you a man soon to become dirt" (10). Having wrapped Paul in the cloak of Athanasius, Antony takes Paul's tunic, so that he may wrap his own body in the garment woven from the leaves of the paradisal palm—more shroud or wedding garment? "On the holy days of Easter and Pentecost, Antony always wore Paul's tunic" (16). Jerome, in closing the *Life of Paul*, makes his *own* desire clear, addressing his reader directly while naming himself (as so often in this text) in the third person: "If the Lord should give him the choice, he would rather have the tunic of Paul" (18). Shrouding Paul in the Athanasian text of Antony, Jerome (like *his* Antony) chooses the tunic of Paul for himself—the sign of Paul's always dissolving "presence," the veil of "death" that extends desire by thwarting possession. And what is the tunic if not the fabric of *this* text?

It is after all queer bait that Jerome has offered his readers, and his repeated switches are still more unsettlingly queer. My point is not merely that this highly innovative hagiographical romance draws us out of the compulsory regime of "civilized" desire and into a realm in which nature and culture collapse around shifting and shiftily gendered figures of male homoeroticism—though that must also be said.[50] Equally significant is the fact that the text will not, finally, *settle* at all, will not settle upon an *object of desire*. Resisting the temptation of objectification to the end by dissolving Paul into the desert sands (having already elided the narrative of the "life" of one represented as always already "soon to become dirt"), a literary dis-composition that might be well renamed *The Corruption of Antony* thereby

also gives tongue-tied witness to the perpetuation of a "pure" desire that "shatters" the subject, rendering it at once less continuous with itself and more open to the (ever receding) "other."[51] The constitutive textual practice of Jerome's hagiography is, to borrow Leo Bersani's phrasing, "the discursive exemplification of desire's mobile repetitions";[52] the disjunctions and iterations marking its apparent narrative failures (its proliferating resistances to closure) are the sources of its critical and critically erotic power. If "sublimation" here begins to seem "co-extensive with (rather than 'beyond') sexuality," it may also prove conceptually superfluous.[53] In other words, to describe ascetic love as "sublimated" is, paradoxically, merely to point to an *intensification* of the movements of displacement and deferral that are inherent in *all* desire.

The Queer Marriage of Malchus the Monk

> *Try to talk about friendship between the sexes, and the conversation always becomes about something else. The inevitable shift is part of what marks the topic as interesting—that it immediately summons a whole range of associations about the way people interact—and is also what defines it as an* idiomatic *problem: friendship between men and women, no matter how intensely it may be valued by how many people, is scarcely nameable as a thing unto itself. Contemporary phrasings, like their predecessors in earlier times, define male/female friendship according to what it is not. "Just friends," "only friends," "not lovers," and similar combinations all in effect describe friendship negatively; all insist that what friendship is not is sexual union or attraction; and all, in the process of making that negative declaration, invite the suspicion that what is being talked about is in fact not friendship but sex, whether unacknowledged, unrealized, or unrevealed.*
>
> —*Victor Luftig,* Seeing Together: Friendship Between the Sexes in English Writing, from Mill to Woolf

If the *Life of Paul the Hermit* experiments with a radical disruption of the genre of romance, Jerome's next—and much later—hagiography, *On the Captive Monk*, seems to follow a "straighter" course, eschewing the world of mythical beasts in favor of the plausibly realistic (even quasi-"historical") realm of novelistic discourse while also cleaving more closely to the conventional plot line of ancient fiction.[54] Indeed, although elsewhere a severe (and defensive) critic of the practice of "syneisaktism," or spiritual marriage,

Jerome (also famously the "friend" of the Roman lady Paula)[55] unexpectedly gives us a *married* monk in this almost parodically romantic Life. In the end, however, the particular emplotment of a captivatingly ascetic coupling puts "marriage" in question while refusing to offer sexual repression (or its kissing cousin, sublimation) as an easy answer, thereby opening up a strangely empty zone—a portentous "idiomatic" gap.

The tale is an old man's tale, related to Jerome in his inquisitive youth (or so he claims), and now retold via the device of reported speech in his own more settled senectitude. The beginning is familiar enough to readers of other christianized novels: a young man whose desire is all for God is pressured by his family to marry a mere girl. The youth flees and eventually—indeed, all too quickly and easily, given the voracious novelistic appetite for adventure—finds true love among the monks of the Syrian desert (*On the Captive Monk* 3).[56] This first miniplot is thus a failed romance, having neglected to defer its conclusion, and the narrator must begin again.[57]

Now the problem is framed in terms of the young monk's desire to visit his widowed mother and attend to his family estate. The old man recalls the thoughts that belonged to his own youth: "After her death, I would sell what little property there was, give part of the proceeds to the poor, erect a monastery with part, and—why do I blush to admit my infidelity?—put aside the remainder to pay for my own comfort." His abbot sees through the demonically inspired ruse and pleads with him to desist from his plans. "And when my abbot failed to persuade me, he fell on his knees and begged that I not desert him, that I not destroy myself." For a second time, the man—who is both our hero and our narrator, Malchus—resists paternal coercion and sets off (3). At this point, he will meet with the adventures he needs, and the story will become a real *story*. Traversing a barren wasteland with about seventy others banded together for protection against marauding Saracens, he and his party are beset by an exotic troop of "Ishmaelites," and Malchus—who had hoped to regain his home and inheritance—instead loses his very freedom. One other of his fellow travelers, a woman, is assigned as a slave to the same owner, and the two are carried by camels to their master's familial encampment in the heart of the harsh desert (4). Like a prisoner, as he comments, Malchus is stripped of his former identity: "I learned to go about naked, for the heat allowed no covering except of one's private parts." Dressed in only a loincloth, Malchus goes native—and thereby unexpectedly recovers the archaic purity of the desert shepherd. "It seemed to me that the holy Jacob and I had something in common; Moses also came to mind" (5). Fleeing the monastery, the slave Malchus is finally

beginning to be a real monk by becoming a wild man. Captivity is now his desire and his pleasure.

But, of course, more trials await the hero. His master, pleased with the slave's performance, desires to reward him, so as further to secure his loyalty. The hitch is that Malchus is none too pleased with his prize. "He handed over to me a fellow-slave, the very woman taken captive with me." Malchus attempts to decline politely ("thanks, but no thanks") on the basis of religious values—invoking not, as we might expect, a monastic but a marital morality. "I . . . stated that I was a Christian and not permitted to accept as a wife a married woman whose husband was still alive." Why this subtle displacement of his resistance? Malchus, the narrator, fails to comment, and we are left to draw our own conclusions. At any rate, the strategy, if that is what it is, backfires. The master is not merely surprised but surprisingly enraged. "He lost his temper and started to chase me with sword drawn." Clearly, Malchus is expected to draw a "sword" of his own in self-defense. Does he? "Had I not immediately grabbed the woman and embraced her, he would have drained me of my blood on the spot," he declares (6). The defense seems a bit shaky for a monk well-practiced in daily martyrdom. But Malchus, as we shall see, prefers to perform his witness before a more private audience.

"Well, then," he continues, "night came, darker than usual and all too quickly, as far as I was concerned. I led my new wife, with misery our bridesmaid, into a half-collapsed cave." Malchus is just about "half-collapsed" himself by this point. Now, for the first time, he knows himself truly a captive. A prisoner in marriage, he resorts to playing the virgin. Throwing himself on the ground in lamentation, he waxes histrionic, bewailing the anticipated loss of his chastity, so long preserved. His concluding speech is that of any maidenly heroine—or martyr—worth her salt, ready to take matters into her own hands, if need be.[58] "Turn the sword against yourself: death of the soul is more to be feared than the body's demise," he proclaims, in self-address. "Sexual purity preserved also has its martyrdom. Let the witness for Christ lie unburied in the desert. I shall play both roles: persecutor and martyr." With these words, Malchus finally draws his sword, "which gleamed in the darkness." At this point, the woman finds her tongue and uses it to expose and explore a few gaps in Malchus's hysterically feminized discourse. Who is forcing him now, anyway? His "bride" may not be a virgin or even "single" (as Malchus has chosen to point out to his master), but this is *not* the opening scene of the *Life of Paul* and, thus, if the master has sheathed his sword without having violated Malchus's virginity, why is

Malchus now waving his own sword about? (And what is a slave doing with a sword? Or is it something else that gleams in the dark?) "Why should you die in order to avoid being joined to me?" queries the woman. (Or why not have died earlier, impaled on the master's sword, rather than grabbing me?) "I would die, if you intended to take me as wife," she proclaims, succinctly clarifying the situation. Having straightened out their roles, the woman—seeking an end to Malchus's alarmingly queer contradictions—makes a practical proposition. "Have me, then, as a partner in sexual purity and love the bond of the soul instead of that of the body. Our masters may presume that you are my husband; Christ will know that you are my brother. We shall easily convince them of our marriage when they see us act in a loving way." Malchus, not surprisingly, is "dumb-founded" (perhaps he has suddenly bitten his tongue). Impressed by the woman's strength, he suddenly "loved her as a wife all the more." More than what? More than when he first drew his sword, perhaps? At any rate, he now loves her "as a wife"—and that is *not* to imply that they are lovers (rather, "just friends"). "Never did I look upon her naked body. Never did I touch her flesh." The strategy is successful: the queer couple is happy, and so are their masters (6).

Malchus's contentment is short-lived, however. Observing a colony of ants, he finds himself missing life with the brethren. "I began to tire of my captivity, to yearn for the cells of the monastery, and to feel a need for the sense of purpose of those ants—where everyone works for the community," he recalls (7). Married, he again experiences himself as a captive in his less-than-monkish servitude. Longing restlessly for the monastery, he nonetheless still clings to his soul's mate: "I couldn't hide my melancholy; she asked why I was so troubled." Bound together in a pledge of secrecy, the two whisper intimately into their pillows, plotting their joint escape (8). But where will it end, for such a pair?

Fleeing by night, the couple hike ten miles to a river, hoping to put their masters off their trail by paddling across the water, supported on inflated sheep's bladders (supplied, with Odyssean effort, by Malchus). Losing most of their provisions in the crossing, they are now threatened by hunger and thirst as well as the dangers of overexposure to the sun, the bites of poisonous creatures that lurk in the sheltering shade of rocks, possible roaming bands of Saracens, and the wrath of their masters—who are certain to be soon in hot pursuit. "Even now, as I tell you this," recalls Malchus, "I begin to tremble in fear; even though I know in my mind I am safe, my whole body shudders" (8). (It is not hard to believe him.) On the third day, sure enough, they see two riders mounted on camels in the distance. They also

see an underground cavern, extending to their right. Even more afraid of their master than of the possible dangers awaiting them in the shadows—"vipers, basilisks, scorpions"—they duck into a crevice just inside the cavern's entrance. There is good reason to think this might turn out to be their tomb, as Malchus tells it. Breathless with fear, they see their master and a slave appear at the entrance (9). A wondrously gruesome theater unfolds before their eyes. The master sends his slave into the cave. The slave enters, shouting to the runaways to give themselves up. "He was still crying out to us when lo! we watched in the darkness as a lioness attacked the man, ripped open his throat and dragged his bloody body into the cave." Torn between terror and joy, the two scarcely have time to recover before their master, impatient with the delay, bursts into the cave, sword drawn once again. "Before he reached our hiding place, he was caught by the wild beast. Who would ever believe that before our eyes a wild creature would fight for us!" enthuses Malchus. It is clear, however, that the lioness's defense of Malchus and his companion is understood as incidental to her own purposes, for Malchus is well aware that "death of a similar sort" is their likely fate. "We were armed solely with our knowledge that our chastity protected us as if by a wall," he adds. However, it is the lioness's own instinct for defense of herself and her cub to which he continues to attribute their safety, in the event. "When morning came, the lioness, fearing a trap and aware that she had been seen, picked up her cub by her teeth and carried it off, thus surrendering her refuge to us." Even then, the couple wait until evening before they dare move from their hiding place (9). Mounting the two camels conveniently positioned outside the cave and equally conveniently laden with provisions, Malchus and his woman slowly but steadily make their way back to civilization. Once safely home, they are even able to sell the camels (10).

Relating this story of salvation occurring "in the presence of violence, in the midst of the desert, and in the company of wild beasts"—as Jerome glosses it in his own notably concise (indeed, almost cautiously pat) conclusion (10)—Malchus takes us neither to the dreamlike desert of Paul nor to the demonic sandscape of the Athanasian Antony. His desert is uncompromisingly "natural"; the fierce lioness is no close kin of Paul's courtly gravediggers; the poison of vipers and scorpions needs no help from Satan; and miracles seem a matter of chance and interpretation.[59] But what of the final outcome? Here is Malchus's own report: "When I returned here, I handed myself over once again to the monks. . . . And as for this woman, whom I cherished as a sister, but did not commit myself to her as a sister,

I turned her over to the virgins" (10). *What*? "Did not commit"? That is all; again, we are left to draw our own conclusions. She: no longer a "wife." He: no longer answering to her call of "brother." He: once again brother to his brothers. She: . . . well, it is possible to hope that "the woman" fares better with her sisters—and why should she not?

Borrowing Malchus's voice, Jerome has here sustained a continuous plot and, in so doing, has risked running the romance into the ground. Closure is deadening without the shattering presence of a disintegrating corpse; desire withers without the deferrals of sublimation; freedom loses its sweetness when utterly released from constraint. Or perhaps the problem could be better stated otherwise: "the woman" who is here at the end so casually "turned over to the virgins" has a voice but never acquires a name. Could it be that Malchus, if he does not even remember what she is called, has long since ceased to hear her clearly, just as he refuses to look at her body or touch her flesh? Sleeping next to her night after night, has he eradicated even temptation? The first, truncated tale of true love in the monastery threatens to subsume and displace the second, more richly developed tale of a queer marriage: however promisingly they begin, this ascetic couple is, by Malchus's own account, an erotic failure, their story leached dry of desire.

Brought under the spell of Malchus's discourse, readers of this Life should not therefore cease to resist, here at the end: this is, after all, still *Jerome's romance*[60]—and thus crucially *not* a seamlessly woven text. Surely we may be expected to notice that the history that Malchus brings to such a calm conclusion not only fails to address the curious query that prompts its original telling[61] but furthermore subtly contradicts what Jerome himself claims to have *seen*—that is, an ancient and pious *couple* living companionably whom (but for their apparent childlessness) he might have mistaken for "Zacharias and Elizabeth of the Gospel" (2). (Manfred Fuhrman tucks his embarrassment at the contradiction into a squirming footnote: "One difficulty remains: according to chapter 2 Malchus lives with the *anus* in *contubernium*; in chapter 10 in contrast he affirms that 'I gave myself again to the monks and handed her over to the virgins.' One should thus assume that the two initiated the *contubernium* at an advanced age.")[62] In the gap between the young Jerome's initial, burning question concerning the character of this coupling—"what was the bond: matrimony, blood, or the Spirit?" (2)—and the elderly Malchus's elusively narrated answer, we can locate the "idiomatic problem" that is also a matrix of unmentionable desire. Perhaps it is the case (as the now-mature Jerome intones in closing) that "sexual purity is never a prisoner and that the person dedicated to Christ

can die but cannot be overcome" (10). Nonetheless, the monk Malchus (so Jerome also insinuates) never ceases to be captivated by his queer wife, as long as he lives.

Hilarion's Last Laugh

> *What is peculiarly postmodern about these celebrity biographies is the way in which bisexuality, though it appears at first to be everywhere—on the jacket blurb, in the headlines, in the index—is ultimately, not nowhere, but elsewhere. Like postmodernism itself, it resists a stable referentiality. It performs.*
>
> *—Marjorie Garber, "Bisexuality and Celebrity"*

When Jerome takes to writing hagiography for the last time, he reverts once more to the affair of Paul, with which he had begun: "We despise voices of abuse of some who, as they once disparaged my Paul, will now perhaps disparage Hilarion." Soon to be companions in abuse (if not literal martyrdom), Paul and Hilarion are nonetheless positioned antithetically in the discourse of their detractors, as Jerome anticipates it: "Censuring the former for his solitude, they may find fault with the latter for his sociability; as the one who was always hidden did not exist, the other who was seen by many is deemed of no account." Rising to the rhetorical occasion with characteristic vigor, Jerome hurls his own voice of praise combatively at an audience determined (as he suggests, with heavy irony) neither to give nor to take any satisfaction. Paul's smilingly elusive solitude will be augmented by a more robust hilarity, his closeted lifestyle complemented by the exhibitionism of a holy man who is "out" to the world. If Paul was like John the Baptist, suggests Jerome, Hilarion is like Jesus, "in the busy throng, eating and drinking." In authoring the *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome is thus saucily turning the other cheek to the lashing tongues of his critics—whether real or fantasized. His muse is none less than the Holy Spirit, and once again inspiration propels him in startlingly new directions (*Life of Hilarion* 1).[63] Having recently, with *On the Captive Monk*, attempted a "straighter" romance, he now attempts a "straighter" hagiography,[64] sweeping the monsters from his closet and sorting out the dualisms of his desert according to (more or less) Athanasian standards of demonizing decency. But here, as in *On the Captive Monk*, it is precisely by playing at generic conventionality that Jerome achieves his queer results.

As in the *Life of Paul*, the emaciated figure of Antony is the pivot around which the tale of a holy man turns. If, in the bold rescripting of Jerome's first saintly Life, Antony's desire for Paul proves all-consuming, now it is the younger monk Hilarion who "is fired with a desire to see" Antony. In hot pursuit of a Desert Father, Hilarion repeats the journey of Jerome's Antony. He also, however, crucially replays the mimetic discipleship of *Athanasius's* Antony—a doubled act of homage that places Antony in the role of master, even as Jerome allows himself (temporarily, as we shall see) to be mastered by the Athanasian hagiography. In the tactically citational *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome's eagerly imitative hero initially observes Antony as closely as Athanasius's Antony once observed the ascetics on the outskirts of his own village (cf. *Life of Antony* 4), "contemplating the method of his life and the gravity of his conduct, his assiduity in prayer, his humility in his dealings with the brethren, his severity in rebuke, his eagerness in exhortation." Where Jerome's Paul challenges Antony on the basis of seniority, his Hilarion—a younger man—seems determined to beat the Athanasian ascetic at his own game, matching him move for move. Although Athanasius's Antony has already made a city of the desert *(Life of Antony* 14), Hilarion, "deeming it a strange anomaly that he should have to bear in the desert the crowds of the cities," stubbornly retraces Antony's first, "precivilized" steps, backtracking to his own home to renounce his familial inheritance before plunging alone and defenseless into the perilous and still monastically pristine wilderness not of Egypt but of Palestine (cf. *Life of Antony* 2–3) (3).

There it is that the ostensibly sociable Hilarion accomplishes his foundationally eremitic self-refashioning. At 15, "stripped bare" of all but "the weapons of Christ" (3), he can be seen (through Jerome's ever-keen vision) to possess not only bright eyes and smooth cheeks but also a "body thin and delicate" (4). (Athanasius, perhaps a man of dim eyesight, never drops a hint concerning Antony's looks.)[65] Outfitted like the corpse of Paul in a rough cloak from Antony's swelling closet of monkish garments—and wearing no more than a regulation sackcloth shirt under that—Hilarion practices an asceticism so stringent that his physique grows yet more frail, premature aging prolonging and intensifying the appealing fragility of his youth: "he became so feeble and his frame so wasted that his bones scarcely held together" (5).[66] Like the Athanasian Antony, he finds himself in a bracingly hostile wilderness populated not by mythical guides but by malevolent demons (6–8), and he inhabits a distinctly nonparadisal cell, "more like a tomb than a house" (9).[67] When, at the end of twenty-two years of punishing solitude,[68] a woman suffering from sterility is "bold enough to break

into the presence of the blessed Hilarion" (13), the holy man emerges ripe with the miracles demanded by visitors who beset him in ever greater numbers, when his fame begins to rival even Antony's—as the master himself acknowledges. ("And if ever the sick from Syria came to him, [Antony] would say to them, 'Why have you taken the trouble to come so far, when you have there my son, Hilarion?'" [24].)

If Jerome's renditions of Hilarion's demonic temptations and holy disciplines do not quite add up to the tale of ascetic progress that he pretends to offer (he confesses it "tedious to narrate singly the successive steps of his spiritual ascent" [10]), his representation of Hilarion's more mature Antonine career as miracle worker and semi-itinerant monastic leader is likewise marked by a strikingly disjunctive and oddly "distant"[69] style. The result is perhaps another kind of tedium,[70] at least for a reader seeking the satisfaction of a clearly drawn plot or sustained characterization, as Jerome loosely strings one miracle story after another, in a sequence that, however artfully constructed,[71] nonetheless builds toward no particular climax. Here we may sense him leaning (perhaps a bit lazily) on the prop of the Athanasian Life, whose progressions are clearly mapped across the terrain of the desert and punctuated by the well-rounded discourses of the ascetic sage. Here we may *also* observe Jerome beginning to explode the master text, in which he has initially planted his own deliberately "primitive" hagiography (with the help of the Holy Spirit): immodestly making himself over as Antony, Jerome's Hilarion has silently shed the Athanasian monk's cloak of restraint. Forgetting to mutter nervously that he derives all his power from God, Hilarion confidently cures illnesses (13–17, 19), engages in wrestling matches with demonically possessed strong men (18), and casts counterspells to protect the victories of charioteers (20) and the virtues of maidens (21). No wonder this holy man is easily taken for a magician (20).[72]

It is the death of Antony that releases the romance in the *Life of Hilarion*. It releases Hilarion first of all from the tedium of his placement "at the head of a grand monastery and a multitude of resident brethren," for it is shortly after apprehending Antony's passing (miraculously, of course [29]—and with reference not only to the Athanasian Antony's knowledge of Amun's death [*Life of Antony* 60] but also to the Hieronymian Antony's vision of Paul's death [*Life of Paul* 14]) that Hilarion makes his break for freedom. Unfortunately, his get-away ass is not quite quick enough: "ten thousand people of various ages and both sexes came together to prevent his departure." Literally made the captive of his devotees, Hilarion stages a seven-day hunger strike before he is finally liberated to undertake a journey in the

company of forty hand-picked monks, eventually arriving (following a few teasingly tedious detours) at Antony's former desert abode. There he is determined to spend the night of the anniversary of his master's death "in vigil in the very place where the saint had died" (30). At this point, and perhaps for the first time, glimmers of a fertile Paradise known to Jerome's Paul and *his* Antony seem to shine through the text. "There is a high and rocky mountain extending for about a mile, with gushing springs amongst its spurs, the waters of which are partly absorbed by the sand, partly flow towards the plain and gradually form a stream shaded on either side by countless palms which lend much pleasantness and charm to the place," writes Jerome, once again at his descriptive best, as he expertly invokes the classical topos of the *locus amoenus*, painting a verbal picture of a "pleasant place." Pacing in Antony's footsteps, gazing on the garden of his design and planting, touching the hoe so often held by Antony's own hands, "Hilarion would lie upon the saint's bed and as though it were still warm would affectionately kiss it." Antony's cell cradles him as closely as a tomb (or rather a womb?), "its sides measuring no more than the length of a sleeping man." But there is more. "On the lofty mountain-top, the ascent of which was by a zig-zag path very difficult, were to be seen two cells of the same dimensions. . . . These were cut out of the live rock and were only furnished with doors." Why *two* cells, *two* living caves? Has Antony been awaiting his partner? Hilarion, who seems to sense that he has arrived very close to some destination, "further asked to be shown his burial place." Readers of the queer *Life of Paul*, perhaps beginning to feel at home in this text, should not be surprised by Jerome's next slippery switch: "but whether they showed him the tomb or not is unknown" (31).

For we are by no means at the end of this Life. Antony's death sets Hilarion in motion without giving him a clear orientation, it would seem; his restlessness, the counterpart of Malchus's, propels him not toward but away from his monastic brothers. The tale, with Hilarion, meanders farther and then nearly calms itself again on its own still waters, before first a persecution (33) and then the yet greater threat of recall to his monastery (34) gradually drive the reluctant hero away from both the Egyptian and the Palestinian cradles of asceticism. "The old man accompanied by Gazanus went on board a ship which was sailing to Sicily" (35). Again, the saint is at the mercy of his gift: working more wonders, he finds himself besieged by the crowds he ostensibly seeks to avoid, in a series of hyperbolic repetitions of the movement of social withdrawal and subsequent pursuit already

established by the Athanasian *Life of Antony*.[73] But there is also a repetition of the more intimately coy withdrawal of Jerome's own Paul in the face of a lover's pursuit. Hilarion will have (and also be) his Antony both ways—and then some, as we shall see. "While this was going on in Sicily, Hesychius his disciple was searching the world over for the old man, traversing the coast, penetrating deserts, clinging all the while to the belief that wherever he was he could not long be hidden" (38). Hesychius, Jerome has informed his readers earlier, is a monk "to whom Hilarion is most powerfully attracted (*quo ille vehementissime delectabatur*)" (28). He also shares with Hilarion the nearly martyrial honor of having been singled out for imperial persecution during the reign of Julian (33). At some point, however, Hilarion has seemingly given his attractive friend the slip, sneaking away on a ship. The hapless Hesychius meets with no centaur or satyr, but after three years of searching he does encounter another queer guide: "a certain Jew, who dealt in old clothes"—perhaps used cloaks for would-be ascetic gents?—informs him of the presence in Sicily of "a Christian prophet" who "was working such miracles and signs one might think him one of the ancient saints." Hopping a ship, Hesychius closes in on his quarry. "And, to cut my story short, the holy man Hesychius fell down at his master's knees and bedewed his feet with tears; at length he was gently raised by him," reports Jerome. Hesychius arrives in the nick of time, as it happens. Although Hilarion remains mysteriously uncommunicative of his intentions with this purportedly delectable monk, his servant Gazanus informs Hesychius "that Hilarion no longer felt himself able to live in those parts, but wanted to go to certain barbarous races where his name and fame were unknown" (38). By now a wanderer of Odyssean (or perhaps rather Aenaean) proportions, Hilarion travels to Dalmatia and thence to Cyprus, working wonders and attracting troublesome crowds wherever he goes, always holding over their heads the magnificent threat of his imminent departure, upon which he acts just often enough (39–42). Hesychius, having been sent back to Palestine, returns to Cyprus to find his master not yet ascending to heaven but instead plotting his departure for Egypt. At this point, the disciple—seemingly unable to face another of Hilarion's sly slips—takes on the role of guide himself, cleverly locating a piece of nearly inaccessible Paradise for Hilarion in the mountainous interior of Cyprus.[74] As it turns out, it is Paradise with a serpentine twist that will finally outdo—and thus perhaps undo—even the demonically infested Athanasian *Life*. "It was indeed a lonely and terrible place; for though surrounded by trees on every side, with water streaming

from the brow of the hill, a delightful bit of garden, and fruit-trees in abundance (of which, however, he never ate), yet it had close by the ruins of an ancient temple from which, as he himself was wont to relate and his disciples testify, the voices of such countless demons re-echoed night and day, that you might have thought there was an army of them." Hilarion is "highly pleased (*valde delectatus*)" with his new digs, and his spirits are revived by the frequent visits of Hesychius during his last years. Inevitably, a few others also manage to make the torturous climb to his lofty peak, their desire to seek out Hilarion only intensified by the seemingly well-founded rumor "that he could not stay long in the same place." ("This habit of his was not due to levity or childishness," notes Jerome somewhat defensively, "but to the fact that he shunned the worry of publicity and praise" [43]). One among the visitors is, evidently, worth naming: "There came also Constantia, a holy woman whose son-in-law and daughter he had anointed with oil and saved from death." Having written a will with his own hand leaving all that he owns—"that is to say, a copy of the gospels, and his sack-cloth tunic, cowl and cloak"—to the absent Hesychius, and having also instructed Constantia and his other visitors to bury him in his garden immediately, the aged saint draws his last breath (44–45).

Death does not, however, put an end either to Hilarion's restless travels or to his wondrously seductive appeal. Hesychius, having frustratingly failed to be present at the holy man's demise and burial, hastily returns to Cyprus and takes up residence on his master's mountaintop perch. If the tale seems here to double back on itself once more, with Hesychius playing Hilarion to Hilarion's Antonine corpse (and behind that, playing Antony to Hilarion's Pauline corpse), the repetition plotted by Jerome is (yet again) strategically inexact. Hesychius's mimesis turns out to be a clever ruse, and this time (it seems) the corpse will not elude its lover: "in the course of about ten months, though at great peril to his life, [Hesychius] stole the saint's body." And what a corpse it is, once triumphantly laid to rest in the Palestinian monastery that Hilarion has decisively and repeatedly (even tediously) fled: "His tunic, cowl and cloak, were uninjured; the whole body as perfect as if alive, and so fragrant with sweet odors that one might suppose it to have been embalmed" (46). The *tale* cannot, however, quite be laid to rest in Palestine. Jerome deems it inappropriate not to mention in closing "the devotion of the holy woman Constantia who, when a message was brought her that Hilarion's body was in Palestine, immediately died, proving even by death the sincerity of her love for the servant of God." He continues

his brief account, apparently unperturbed by its tragic dimensions: "For she was accustomed to spend whole nights in vigil at his tomb and to converse with him as if he were present in order to stimulate her prayers" (47).

Leaving the jilted woman in the dust, Hesychius seems to have the fragrant object of his desire in his snuffling grasp at last. But does he really? Hilarion, after all, only intended to leave him his clothes and a self-inscribed volume of Scripture that he had once tried, without success, to give away to a ship's captain (having already memorized its contents). "Even at the present day one may see a strange dispute between the people of Palestine and the Cypriots, the one contending that they have the body, the other the spirit of Hilarion," remarks Jerome, sustaining the ambiguity introduced into his text at the penultimate moment. Where *is* Hilarion, anyway? the reader wonders. "In both places great miracles are wrought daily, but to a greater extent in the garden of Cyprus, perhaps because that spot was dearest to him," Jerome concludes (47). What? Dearer (more delectable) than the spot subsequently selected by the (also delectable) Hesychius?

Being both here and there, Jerome's Hilarion is, in the end, neither here nor there, as either subject or object of desire. (Yet he is "ultimately, not nowhere, but elsewhere.") And if this hilarious holy man has the last laugh,[75] proving as elusive in his publicized mobility as Paul in his concealed stability, does Jerome's closing statement not hint that Hesychius is the butt of Hilarion's best joke? Perhaps there are two holes carved out of living rock on a mountaintop not in Egypt *or* Palestine but rather in Cyprus, where a zig-zagging path dodges the devious misguidance of an overly literal-minded disciple. And what could be queerer, in the context of the incipient "homonormativity" of ascetic sociality, than to imagine that it is the holy *woman* who still holds ghostly converse with the monk Hilarion, in the garden of untasted fruit trees where he asked to be buried, near the haunted ruins of a temple—might it even be a temple of the Cyprian Venus?[76] (And might it even be Paula, Jerome's oh-so-"constant" companion, who disrupts the tedium of a desert of renunciation with her juicy hilarity?) Ah, but perhaps Jerome has let more out of the closet, here at the end of this last Life, than he quite intended.

"In the beginning, there can be only dying, the abyss, the first laugh. After that, you don't know. It's life that decides. Its terrible power of invention, which surpasses us. . . . Write! What? Take to the wind, take to writing, form one body with the letters. Live!"[77] Jerome is always beginning his Life, writing, writing all the beginnings.

Prolongations: Fantasies of a Faun

But, enough. such a secret chose for confident
The vast and twin reed on which one plays under the blue sky:
Which, diverting to itself the cheek's disturbance,
Dreams, in a long solo, that we are beguiling
The surrounding beauty by fictive
Confusions between itself and our credulous song;
And (dreams) of making—as high as love modulates—
Vanish from the everyday dream of a back
Or of a pure side followed by my closed eyes,
A sonorous, illusory and monotonous line.

—Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Afternoon of a Faun"

This passage from a poem about an artfully dreamy faun engages Leo Bersani's revisionary reading of Freudian theories of "artistic sublimation"—a reading that may in turn illumine the artistry of Jerome's sublime eroticism. In the cited verses Bersani finds "the suggestion that sublimation is not a transcendence of desire, but rather a kind of extending of desire which has taken the form of a productive receding of consciousness."[78] The faun's physicalized sensuality—"the cheek's disturbance"—is "diverted to," replicated, supplemented, and modulated by the reed. The reed's song is not, however, "the esthetic distillation of his sensual fantasies of a nymph's back or thigh,"[79] which would, in translating the body's lines into an equivalent line of music, disguise or repress the sensual impulse. Rather, it is an anticipatory dream of such a translation, a dream that effectively extends and suspends desire by an ironically dismissive deferral that finally eludes the "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line" and thereby retrieves the "songe ordinaire" as free-floating "reverie" (played on an instrument "vast and twin"). The faun wonders if he has really seen the nymphs or merely imagined them, seduced by his own art. And yet what is reality if (as he dreams it) nature itself is "beguiled" by the confusions between itself and his song? Balancing a "credulous" fiction against a nature imagined as equally credulous, the faun's self-irony unsettles the "real." "To remember [the nymphs] is to wonder if he really saw them. Yet to doubt their reality is to wish to paint them, and to paint them is to return to his desires, and to confuse, once again, what he desires with what may really be there." Thus, the faun moves from "an art of entrapped realism to an art of happily mobile ironies."[80] On Bersani's reading, the poem "encourages us to view sublimation not as a mechanism by which desire is denied, but rather as a self-reflexive activity

by which desire multiplies and diversifies its representations." He adds, "There is, to be sure, a certain purification of the desiring impulse, but purification should be understood here as an abstracting process which is not necessarily desexualizing."[81] In fact, Bersani suggests that sublimation—understood as the mechanism of desire's prolongation—is "coextensive with" sexuality. Its effect, exemplified by Mallarmé's poem, is to make "the objects of desire productively unlocatable"[82] and thereby also to dislocate, even very nearly annihilate, the subject. "In his willful recreation of scenes which may never have taken place"—that is, the faun's subsequent (fantasized?) sexual assault on the nymphs—"the faun narcissistically indulges a self already burned away. Desire purifies the faun of his identity."[83]

Reading Mallarmé's textual faun over Bersani's shoulder, I am not only interrupting but also thereby prolonging my own reading of Jerome. Slipping and sliding between fantasies of fauns, returning once again to Jerome's improbable homunculus, I privilege certain aspects of the *Life of Paul* for the purpose of proposing an interpretation of Hieronymian sublimation, the movements of which are replicated, supplemented, and modulated in his subsequent hagiographies. In the already delicately ironized persona of Antony, Jerome "dreams" a centaur, a faun, a she-wolf, a raven, twinned he-lions—and thereby also dreams a holy man in the desert. Are these demonic illusions or the offspring of the desert itself? he queries. (Is the author himself mastered by his own fantasy? Is the desert—that "surrounding beauty" so frequently and artfully depicted in Hieronymian ekphrasis—itself "beguiled," seduced by his "credulous song"?) "We are uncertain" is his own answer. Indeed, as readers we are destined to remain uncertain. The objects of desire and identification, already phantasmatically multiplied and diversified within the *Life of Paul*, are "productively unlocatable." "To remember is to wonder if he really saw them. Yet to doubt their reality is to wish to paint them, and to paint them is to return to his desires, and to confuse, once again, what he desires with what may really be there." Is it possible that the quintessentially elusive, ever dissolving Paul himself, "one who was always hidden," "did not exist" (as the Life's detractors claimed [*Life of Hilarion* 1])? We remain uncertain. And thus, as the anticipated "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line" of the song eludes us (as we elude it), through the artful interruptions and inexact repetitions by which Jerome's narrative is left ever incomplete, our own desire is purified, made sublime, reaching "as high as love modulates." In the process, we readers are purified of fixed identity: where the object of desire is infinitely dispersed, so too is the subject. Jerome's "edifying" hagiography does not so much fashion an ascetic self by

suppressing desire as intensify desire to the point that the self itself is fragmented, multiplied, rendered "productively unlocatable."

But the peculiar purity of the *Life of Paul*, marking the beginning of Jerome's sublimely sensual writing career, gives way to further genre-shattering repetitions. Conceived much later (and in practically the same breath), the strikingly different accounts of Malchus and Hilarion significantly supplement not only the *Life of Paul* but also each other. In *On the Captive Monk*, strategic gaps between the first-person accounts of "Jerome" and "Malchus"—both represented in the act of recollecting their past—crucially disrupt the narrative line of the not-quite-Life. Malchus seems to wish to be seen from the perspective of his desire for his faceless "brethren," configuring "captivity" as that which alienates him from the male monastic collective. And yet his own account already produces a fracturing of both the subject and the object of desire. It is his virtual "wife," partner of his captivity, who acquires a "face"—who attains a nearly recognizable persona—in Malchus's narrative; yet she remains not only nameless but also seemingly unmentionable as an object of desire in the inconclusive moment of her studiedly casual dismissal. Malchus's imperfectly sublimated love for the woman who threatens (or promises) to captivate him is gapingly unresolved, the incompleteness of his narrative intensified by its unacknowledged inconsistency with Jerome's own narrative of a cohabiting "couple" who had survived captivity through the liberative power of their collusive virginity. In the same stroke, Malchus's love for his shadowy monastic brothers is also rendered tantalizingly incomplete—a barely imaginable figment in the text. One who attempts to identify Malchus's desire—to identify *with* Malchus's desire—is thwarted. This seemingly satisfying romance is finally profoundly unsettling. Painfully suspended in the fracturing moment of interruption, the reader is pushed into "a self-reflexive activity" in which the self itself recedes in the face of the abysmal uncertainty regarding desire's proper object.

With the *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome's "happily mobile ironies" are in full play. Indeed, his laughing holy man is an icon of the mobility of desire itself. Constantly on the run, Hilarion is always thereby prolonging his longing; the goal of his journey is ever-shifting, frequently indeterminate. Miracles proliferate as so many replicating signs of excess, saturating nature's credulity with holy power while propelling him onward. A slippery subject, he is also a frustratingly unlocatable object of desire, as his devoted follower Hesychius discovers repeatedly. Ironically represented as Hilarion's beloved, Hesychius takes the part of the active lover, incited to imitate his master's mobility in his vigorous pursuit of Hilarion. But does he become a worthy

disciple? Does he master the supple arts of sublimation under Hilarion's sly tutelage? We are uncertain. Now a trickster himself, Hesychius thwarts Hilarion's return to Egypt—site of Antony's holy mount—by replicating the Antonine Paradise in Cyprus. Subsequently, he steals away with Hilarion's relics, restoring them to their proper place, so as to restore to Palestine its proper holy man. Hesychius's doubled duplicities produce unexpected and ambiguous results. The Cypriot garden, perhaps still haunted by the goddess of love (and clearly marked by a holy woman's constancy of desire), continues to divert the holy man, exceeding and thereby escaping Hesychius's (mis)direction. A third place, of productive indeterminacy, neither Egypt nor Palestine (and thus "off the map" of established ascetic practice and pilgrimage), Cyprus effectively disturbs, without decisively canceling, Palestine's claims on Hilarion. A contested object of desire, Hilarion, "who was seen by many," is in the end quite literally unlocatable, and thus he reclaims the trickster's role for himself, giving the final slip that makes this endpoint of Hieronymian hagiography another beginning for ascetic dissolution. Disrupting (yet again) the "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line," withdrawing even the disintegrating not-quite-presence of a corpse, Jerome shatters his readers with the purity of sublime desire.

Reading (as) Another, Woman

> *One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible; the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of "matter," but also of "sexual pleasure."*
>
> —*Luce Irigaray,* This Sex Which Is Not One

The "hom(m)o-sexuality" (re)produced by the *Life of Paul*[84]—differently, partially, and ambiguously disrupted by both *On the Captive Monk* and the

Life of Hilarion—raises particular challenges and creates distinctive opportunities for one who would read for the "woman" in Jerome's hagiographies—for one who would read *as* a "woman," even if also to lose "her(self)" in the process. Bersani has suggested that male homoeroticism may serve as a potent figure for the disruptive potentialities of sexuality, in the context of the long and violent discursive reign of a phallic subjectivity. Writing boldly into the storm of the AIDS crisis, he proposes that, "if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death." He continues: "If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence. . . . Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis."[85] At this point, my reading of Bersani must become explicitly supplementary, extending consideration of the sexual difference that is so swiftly marked as to be partly elided in his (awkwardly positioned parenthetical) text. If the "ideal of proud subjectivity" is undeniably "shared . . . by men *and* women," what are the limits to the commonality so forcefully underlined by the conjunctive "*and*," limits nonetheless signaled by the acknowledgment that the ideal, and thus presumably also its erotic shattering, is "shared—differently"? Does the death of "man" still leave "woman" "elsewhere" in relation to even a distinctly queered discourse? Is our theory of sexuality queer enough, is it sufficiently ascetic, if it does not also unveil "the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language"?[86]

Reading the *Life of Paul* yet again, assuming the feminine role deliberately through mimetic play, it is my desire to begin with (to begin as) the garlanded subject in the garden of delight, surrendering to the torture of stream's murmur, wind's whisper, feathers' softness, petals' caress, and (finally!) of a lover's rousing fondling of nakedly bared skin—and then (when I can bear it no longer) to find myself just barely restored to power, by the skin of my teeth. (But, one might object, teeth have no skin, no softness, and, yes, the bite of my skin *is* my womanly hardness.) Reading as a woman, am I not, however, also the seducer and the torturer in this text? At the same time, am I not the one tormented by my own desire, my own tantalizingly thwarted desire, spit back chokingly into my kisses, like a disavowed tongue? The tongue, however, was mine to start with, its disavowal

stolen from me: now I claim it again. But what do I claim, the tongue's integrity or its articulate dismemberment? Where does the biting frustration of bodily longing lead, what is lost, what is gained (what is prolonged), in the conversion desired in the *Life of Paul*, produced by the desire of this text, provoked by my desire to read this text, from within, and also from elsewhere?

Having temporarily lost my tongue (along with my bearings), I find myself again where Jerome would have me, wandering through the desert, tracking my bitter-sweet, hard-bitten longing. I am Antony. (But how can this be? Where is the place for a woman in Antony's desert, in his city of men,[87] and is Paul's desert any different? Is she a *mother*?) Ah: there it is, the monstrous mute signifier, horse-man, so excessively male as to be almost something more . . . , something *less* . . ., than a man. Tracking the signs, dreamily traversing the signs, slipping from one to the next, centaur—satyr—*she*-wolf, I am drawn into another Paradise. The gain (following upon the huge loss) is another garden (with a single, spreading tree), another spring of well-contained wetness, other shadows and other light, another cave (but whose?), other delights in a cave. Banished again (for my lover is stern and commanding), I will again be restored: I am now purposefully in pursuit of my desire. Recovering the lover finally, embracing, kissing once more, in my arms I find . . . a corpse. The lover has eluded me; the lover is mine. Yes, we are twinned like the long-maned lions who help me dig this grave. I give the lover my cloak; I take the lover's tunic for my own (I will never take it off again!); we wear one another's clothes. Covering the body with dirt, I know my own corruptibility: I am the dirt that clothes my lover; the decaying corpse is my threadbare garment. We mingle and are dissolved in one another, like the desert sand. Tasting Paradise in the grit on my tongue, I no longer know myself as woman, or man.

Sliding into the tale of a captive monk, I have indeed found my tongue again, now a woman's tongue unambiguously interpellated into the text, a sharp tongue of direct address, hailing a hesitant desire, attempting to give rise to a man who can only speak of swords and wives, who can only perceive his own captivity when confronted (in a cave) by my unvirginal singularity. Malchus! I call him. He mumbles my name inaudibly, but I imagine I can hear it, even if no one else can. Together we face the master's sword; together we elude the sword; together we are saved from its violence by a mother's incidental intervention. Emerging from the lioness's cave, we are like twinned cubs. And yet, where the path leads from there, I cannot say. I see only the doublings of duplicity, a multiplication of possibilities, which

may or may not cancel each other. A sister who is not a sister, a wife who is not a wife, I tease at the cords of my constraint and my freedom; my tongue teases this text, explores its potential worlds—life with the sisters, life with the brother, life with the brethren. Shattered by so much freedom, so much constraint, I am swallowed up by a text that can scarcely hold a place for me, can scarcely hold me in place. It is from elsewhere that I will return, again and again.

Hailed now by name, by the name of Constance, I assume a role once more, extending myself into the *Life of Hilarion*. Easily recognizable are the holy man's laugh, his constant motion, the felicitous ironies that provide for a provisional constancy of desire, that make provisionality the only basis for desire's mobile constancy. But I, Constantia, am the true trickster in this tale, Hilarion my happy conspirator—or so I fancy it. Playing at my womanly devotions, I find myself haunted by this garden, at home in this haunted garden, where Venus's gloriously terrifying fruits delight most when not consumed. I know how to taste without devouring, and I desire to be tasted but not devoured (not put to the sword). I live alongside the fruits of the garden, I am among its fruits. Indeed, there is no God who will banish me. With veils of tears, I cover up my juicy laughter. Playing at tragedy, it is I who give the last slip in this comedy of Hesychian error (and if Hilarion wants to slip back into this grave with me, dying another death, let him come). Ha! Dying to desire, dying of desire, dying for desire, we are only beginning to unwrite—and thus to rewrite—our lives.

Already fractured, disappearing from (her own) sight, is it not (also, differently) another, "woman," who "proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis"? Is it not "woman" who knows that the "shattering" of the self is not an end in itself but rather the beginning of a subjectivity that is ever coming to be?[88] Does Jerome himself not hint at this very possibility?